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# IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

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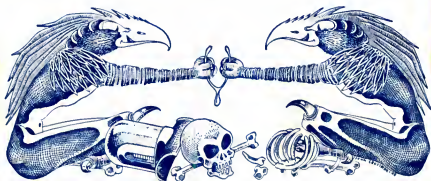
STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY



## HELL'S ANGEL

BY  
ROBERT  
BLOCH

VOL. 2 NO. 3  
ISSUE #10, 5



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Front cover by Hannes Bok, Illustrating  
a scene from "Hell's Angel"

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**Y**OU'VE already noticed a number of improvements this month. The cover format for one thing. Makes the title easier to read, doesn't it? And being easier to read, you'll spot it more quickly at your favorite newsstand. Sec, we just can't wait to get the magazine in your hands!

**T**HEN there's the paper we're now using. It's a hard sheet finish newsprint. Notice the better printing impressions? Makes the type stand out firmer and of course the illustrations are greatly improved. Sure we lost some bulk by switching to this new paper stock—but the magazine hasn't lost a single page or line of type. You're still getting the full 160 pages, and, may we add, 160 pages of the finest fiction in the field—bar none!

**W**E thought you'd like this improvement in cover design and inside paper stock. Of course, if you don't, why let's hear about it. We can always go back to pulp paper! But we think you'll agree with us that this issue is a big step forward in production quality. These are just a few of the things we intend to do to keep IMAGINATION at the top of your preferred reading list!

**S**PEAKING of reading, you've got some fine stories awaiting your attention in this month's lineup. Bob Bloch, one of your all-time favorites, did a very fine job of writing the lead novel around the "pleasing to the eye" Hannes Bok cover. And also, we're proud to present the first story Charlie Myers has written that does not concern his terrific "dream gal" Toffee. So what's with "Toffee" now that we mention her? We're happy to report that we have a new Toffee novel on our desk right now, and we'll schedule it for a very early issue. Needless to say, it's a terrific yarn with a basketful of laughs on every page. Watch for it soon.

**W**E'RE not going to talk very much about the stories in this issue. We'll leave that up to you after you finish reading them. So sit down and drop us a line letting us know what you think of the yarns. You know, that's the only way an editor can tell the type of stories his readers prefer. We don't intend to dictate story types, nor do we intend to clutter up our editorials with silly phrases about being the best magazine because we pay the most for the material we use. As we have in years past when we edited other top magazines

in the field we intend to let the magazine speak for itself. It does by your letters and the circulation behind them.

**A**T this point we'd like to say we are very gratified by the reception you've given IMAGINATION, especially under our editorship. The hundreds of letters that pour in across our desk testify to the approval you've given us. We're not only happy about that, we're proud too! And to those many hundreds of you who have written us, we'd like to take this opportunity of thanking you and answering via the editorial.

**N**OW to a really big surprise. As you know the next issue of IMAGINATION marks the magazine's First Anniversary. That's the September issue which will be on sale promptly the first week in July. To celebrate the occasion we are bringing back an old favorite of yours. Many thousands of you readers have been thrilled in the past by this author's work in AS & FA. We know we were—even while we edited those magazines! Then he stopped writing fiction and devoted his time to educational film

work. And—but to make a long story short, we got in touch with him and convinced him that he should return to his first love, science-fiction.

**S**O next issue marks the triumphant return of Dwight V. Swain. Many of you will never forget his CRUSADE ACROSS THE VOID in AS. All we can say is wait until you read his great, CRY, CHAOS!

**O**F course, we had another reason besides the Anniversary Issue for bringing Dwight back to the fold. A great many of you readers have written us asking why there isn't more great action adventure science-fiction being written today. That is, the type of story that the late master, Edgar Rice Burroughs made so famous, notably with his John Carter series. Dwight Swain has been likened many times to Burroughs in this respect. And we don't mean to imply here that he is imitating style or anything like that. The simple truth is that Dwight has that rare gift for story-telling that so few writers have. He can lift you from your present-day surroundings and plant you right in the middle of an alien existence. You can actually see yourself there beside the hero.

**W**E'VE always maintained that it's one thing to write a cute story or a thought-provoking one, or a just plain "literary" masterpiece. But the writer who can make the reader feel he is part of the story he is telling has really got talent. Dwight is such a writer. So we're proud to present his new novel next issue—and at the same time assure you that he'll be on the

(Continued On Page 64)



"Hmmp! Those sneopy Earth People again!"

# HELL'S ANGEL



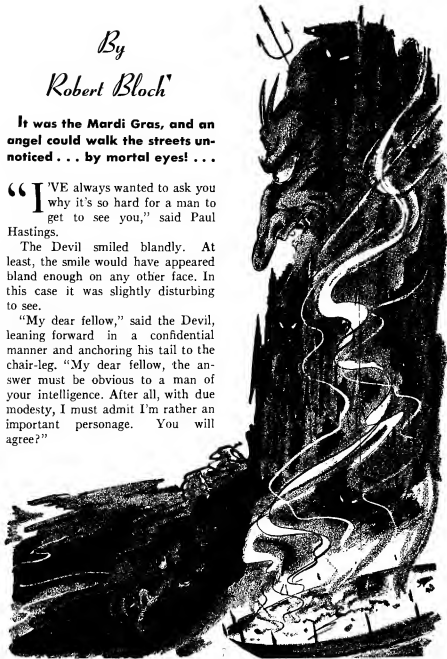
By  
*Robert Bloch*

**It was the Mardi Gras, and an angel could walk the streets unnoticed . . . by mortal eyes! . . .**

**"I**'VE always wanted to ask you why it's so hard for a man to get to see you," said Paul Hastings.

The Devil smiled blandly. At least, the smile would have appeared bland enough on any other face. In this case it was slightly disturbing to see.

"My dear fellow," said the Devil, leaning forward in a confidential manner and anchoring his tail to the chair-leg. "My dear fellow, the answer must be obvious to a man of your intelligence. After all, with due modesty, I must admit I'm rather an important personage. You will agree?"



Paul Hastings nodded.

"Naturally, if you understand my position, you can easily see I cannot be bothered with every Tom, Dick and Harry—or Harriet—who gets the notion of communicating with me. If I did there would be no time left to myself. And aside from tempting mortals, you know, I have other souls to fry."

The Devil shook his head to accentuate his point. "And so you see, my dear sir, I've had to make it difficult to reach me. My chief detractors—members of the clergy and the like—would have it that I am continually in search of souls to snare. Why, badness me, nothing could be further from the truth!"

The Devil laughed heartily until sparks flew out of his mouth. "Matter of fact, I have souls aplenty—souls to burn, you might say. No need to tempt most mortals. They pave their own road to perdition without the need of assistance from me, I assure you.

"The only cases that interest me personally any more are chaps like you—men and women clever enough to dig through tangled and abstruse spells, and wise enough to interpret them. If they are intelligent enough and eager enough to go to all the bother of summoning me, then I am happy to appear. Besides, it is a simple matter to do business in such cases. Obviously such persons are eager to sell their souls to me. I don't have to haggle and persuade and coax, like a used car salesman."

"What do you know about used

car salesmen?" asked the young man.

"Why, everything," said the Devil. "You might have guessed that I get them all, sooner or later."

SATAN sat back and stroked his spade beard, while Paul Hastings marvelled once again at his appearance. For the Devil looked exactly the way the Devil had always looked in pictures. He was the Devil of song and story and laxative bottle labels, to the life. And now he was sitting here in Paul Hastings' little garret, just as comfortable as you please, purring and beaming and pulling his beard.

"Speaking of selling souls," the Devil murmured, "we might as well get down to business right away. I presume you had something of the sort in mind when you evoked me?"

Paul Hastings blushed and hung his head. "Well, yes," he murmured. "You know how it is. Times are tough, a fellow has to get along, and the finance company won't loan me anything without security. So I was wondering if—"

The Devil raised a delicate hand so that the black claws gleamed in the light of the tallow candles Hastings had set on the floor.

"No need to go into embarrassing details," he said, kindly. "I quite understand. I've been handling cases like yours for years. Once made a deal with a chap by the name of Faust who—but I digress. What I mean to say is, I'm prepared to make a handsome offer for your soul. A clean-cut intelligent chap like you



doesn't often come my way. I'd be happy to place my resources at your disposal if only you'd tell me what it is you have in mind."

Paul Hastings shrugged. It wasn't much of a gesture, but somehow it managed to include his shock of unruly, uncut blonde hair, his wrinkled, shabby suit, his frayed shoelaces, his scuffed shoes, and the floor of the Bourbon Street garret in which the shoes and their owner stood.

"I see very well what you have in mind," said the Devil. "It's something like the letter 'S' with two lines drawn through it. Am I correct?"

"Right," answered the young man.

"You don't want eternal life, or three wishes, or any of that nonsense?"

"Certainly not. I've figured it all out. I have youth, and good health, and I needn't ask for such things."

"Hmm." The Devil stroked his beard until it almost purred. "Think it over carefully before you make your decision, though. What about power? Lots of men like power, you know. And then some chaps have a fondness for feminine companionship. Without appearing to boast, I think I could arrange anything you might want along those lines — or curves."

"I'm way ahead of you," Hastings answered. "Give me the money and the power and the women will take care of themselves."

"Very true." The Devil nodded and exhaled softly, so that a faint reek of sulphur filled the room. He extended a claw and pulled a parch-

ment out of the air, then extended his tail and proffered the point wrapped around a fountain pen. "Here, we are," he murmured. "Think I remembered to fill this pen before I left—nice, fresh blood, everything legal—so if you'll just sign here, we'll have our contract."

"Uh-uh." Paul Hastings shook his head.

"What's the matter? You aren't—what is the current phrase?—chicken, are you?" The Devil pouted a bit and struck his cloven hoof against the floorboards.

"No. But the point is, I have no intention whatsoever of selling you my soul."

THE cloven hoof stamped sharply, and the ancient boards gave off a shower of dust and sparks. "Then why, might I ask, did you summon me in the first place?"

"Well, it's like this," Hastings explained. "I moved in here about two weeks ago. Came to New Orleans expecting to get a job—I'm a public-relations man, you know—"

"Press agent!" snapped the Devil. "Don't tell me, we get plenty of your kind where I come from."

"All right, press agent," Hastings agreed. "But I'm not the kind you'd get. That's probably my trouble. I was, and am, an honest one. And my job fell through. Moved out of the hotel to this attic in the French Quarter and spent the days pounding the pavements looking for a job."

"Get on with it," urged the Devil. "I want to go out for some fresh air

—stuffy as hell in here.”

“Well, to make it simple, I couldn’t find any job. But I did find something else, right here in this room.”

“What?”

“These books, under the bed,” Hastings produced a handful of tattered, battered old volumes. “Latin, you can see. Turned out to be textbooks of demonology—old books on sorcery, with spells and incantations. Must have belonged to whoever lived here years ago. I asked the landlady and she didn’t know; thinks she remembers an old man who owned the house once in the days before the war—he was interested in Voodoo or some such thing — and when they took him away to the asylum and turned this place into a rooming-house he must have left his books behind.”

“I know who you’re speaking of,” muttered the Devil. “The man’s name was Red—Red Grimoire, I think, a Frenchman. He’s boarding with me, now.”

“So I read the books,” Hastings continued, “and decided to try out some of the spells. Naturally, I decided to try and call you up.”

“Which you did. And quite a lot of trouble you went to,” commented the Devil, glancing around the tiny room. “All this blue chalk, and chicken-blood, and candles in pentagrams, and the rest of the mess—but why did you go to such bother when you had no intention of selling your soul to me?”

“Because I still had hopes we

might do business.”

“How?”

“Well, don’t you buy anything except souls? Services, perhaps?”

“What service could you possibly offer me?” asked the Devil.

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems to me as if Hell could use some good public relations. I mean, human beings don’t seem to think too kindly of the place, or of yourself either, if you’ll pardon my frankness.”

“You’d make Hell popular?” jeered the Devil.

“I’m not saying what I’ll do. But I still want money without selling my soul for it, and I wondered if there wasn’t something a human being might do for you which you couldn’t do yourself.”

“Something a human being might do——”

THE Devil stared at Hastings until his face burned from the intensity of the gaze. Noting this, the Devil shifted his glance and stared at the wall until two holes began to char and smoke. Then, “I’ve got it!” he snapped.

“You have?”

“Yes, and so have you—a task, I mean! My dear chap, you were right in calling me. There is something very special you might do, as a straight business deal. Right in your line, too. I’ve had a pet project in mind for a long time, and I believe you can carry it out. It will mean money galore for you, and help me immeasurably.”

"And I won't be selling my soul?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'll do it," Hastings held out his hands. "But cash in advance, please. Not that I don't trust you, but one hears so many rumors——"

"Competitors give me a bad name," sneered Satan. "But you'll have to wait a while. You see, I can't give you the money. I can only give you the chance to earn it."

"But I thought——"

"Don't believe all you hear. I have no power to produce gold out of nowhere, and besides we're off the gold standard. I can't make dollar bills because if I created too many it would disrupt our present economy — and I like our present economy the way it is; took a lot of trouble to build it up. And besides, if I counterfeited the money, it would be dishonest."

"You disappoint me," Hastings sighed. "Here I thought you were capable of just waving your hand or your—your tail, maybe — and there it was."

"Very few people make money waving either object," commented the Devil, dryly. "You see, they tell so many lies about me. For instance, there are stories about me appearing in all kinds of shapes and forms at will, but you see me as I really am. It isn't true that I can change into human appearance, for example. And that's why I need a human being for this job I sug-

gest. The job that will make you a fortune."

Hastings stood up. "Just what is it you want me to do?" he asked.

"Very simple," said the Devil. "I want you to kidnap an angel."

"Huh?"

"You heard me," repeated Satan, patiently. "Just kidnap an angel. Steal one from heaven, as it were."

"But——"

"I know what you're going to say, and it's all arranged. I have the means of getting you transported to heaven and back again. I have a plan for capturing an angel. There is nothing for you to worry about. As the vulgar expression has it, the job is all cased." Satan smiled. "You see, I've had this plan in mind for centuries, but there was nobody to carry it out. Naturally, a fiend can't get into heaven, and most men—in spite of the fact that they're always talking about the joys of heaven—seem strangely reluctant to go there. But I've wanted an angel for ages, and you're the chap to bring one back for me."

"LET me get this straight," Hastings sighed. "You want me to kidnap an angel and bring it down to Hell?"

"No, not to Hell. To earth. The angel will live on earth. That's the whole point of the scheme."

"What scheme?"

"The one that makes your fortune."

"Aren't you going to let me in on the details?"

The Devil shook his horns. "I shall assuredly do so — the very moment that you and the angel return. It is all arranged and perfectly safe."

"I don't know."

"It's a billion-dollar proposition," said the Devil. "Guilt-edged." Again the tail waved the fountain-pen. "Here's the contract. Look it over, and sign at the bottom."

Paul Hastings took the contract. Words appeared on the parchment as he read. Yes, it sounded perfectly legal. He was to kidnap the angel and in return was guaranteed a fortune not to exceed one billion dollars, by means to be explained. No soul was to be sold. Whereas, hereinafter, aforesaid, and etcetera.

"Looks OK to me," he commented.

"Then sign. Be careful with that pen, though. It leaks at times. Wouldn't want you to get corpuscles all over the table." The Devil watched considerably as Paul Hastings affixed his name to the document. Then Satan in turn wrote his signature.

"Fine," he said, folding up the parchment. "I'll just file this away in Limbo for safekeeping." A whisk, and the contract disappeared.

"All right, what next?" asked the young man.

"Meet me at midnight tomorrow night at the amusement park out at Lake Pontchartrain," said the Devil.

"What for?"

"Go to heaven!" said the Devil. "And please don't ask so many questions. Er—I suggest that you air the room out after I leave. It's quite stuffy."

The Devil disappeared in a puff of smoke. Paul Hastings, coughing, ran to the window and opened it wide. He hung his head over the sill and gulped down air. Then he shook his head.

"So I'm going to heaven tomorrow night. Isn't that a hell of a deal?"

LAKE Pontchartrain glittered beneath a February moon as Paul Hastings — his battered coupe wheezing away its last gallon of gas (regular, of course: he hadn't been able to afford Ethyl for months) rattled towards the amusement park. The gleaming white skeleton of a huge prehistoric monster loomed ahead — and with a shock, Hastings recognized it as the outline of a roller coaster.

He parked the car almost directly beneath it, and the little auto made a lonely black dot on the empty road. He shivered as he crunched down the gravel pathway, eyes alert for his partner in crime.

"Hello there!" came a voice. "Here I am! No — look up!"

Sure enough, the Devil was sitting on top of the roller coaster, waving his tail in a friendly greeting.

"What are you doing up there?"

Paul called.

"Waiting for you, of course. Climb up — don't be afraid."

Now there was certainly no reason for Paul Hastings to be afraid of climbing up the sides of a rickety roller coaster at midnight in order to keep a rendezvous with the Devil. So up he went, clambering shakily but steadily, until he reached the top. From that vantage point he could see the lights of New Orleans, the Navy landing and training field, the airport, and the peculiar incandescent luminence of the Devil's eyes.

The Devil was sitting in the front car of one of the roller-coaster vehicles. He helped Hastings to climb in beside him.

"Hope you like it," he said.

"Like what?"

"This. It's your plane, of course."

The Devil indicated the car in which they sat.

"I'm going to heaven in this?"

"Certainly. You expected to fly, didn't you? I mean, it's millions of miles high, you know."

"I know," sighed Paul Hastings. "And I don't like your altitude. However —"

"However, you signed a paper," the Devil continued, for him. "And it's time to go."

"But how can I fly in this flimsy car?"

"It's not a flimsy car. It's a plane besides which your current developments in jet-propulsion appear infantile; its simplicity of design and

function are such that you need do nothing but act in the capacity of a passenger."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's fueled, there's an automatic pilot to guide you to heaven and back, an automatic timing device to function during your stay; the course is accurately charted and all you need to do now is wave goodbye."

"I still claim it's a lousy roller-coaster car," said Paul Hastings. "And I wouldn't go over the tracks in it, let alone to heaven and back." His companion stepped out of the car.

"What do you say to this?" asked the Devil. "And this? Also this — and this — and, at the risk of becoming boringly repetitious—this?"

HE punctuated his remarks by deft movements of hands and tail; reaching under the car and elongating it abruptly, smoothing it over until the surface assumed a silvery sheen, pulling at the sides until wings were extended, fumbling with the interior and drawing out an instrument panel, waving across the seat and enclosing it in a glass bubble.

Hastings now sat in a streamlined silver cylinder, a winged projectile that looked like something designed by Hannes Bok. The bubble over his head served both to insulate and isolate him; he had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

"Why didn't you show me this

in the first place?" he shouted. The Devil balanced his cloven hoof delicately on the roller-coaster track and shrugged discreetly.

"Somebody might have driven by and seen it," he said. "As it is, you're going to leave in a moment — just as soon as you pull the left-hand switch."

Paul Hastings surveyed the instrument panel. "Looks complicated," he yelled. "How about some instructions? And what do I do to capture an angel?"

"It's all planned for you," the Devil answered. "Now just listen to me and you're on your way."

The young man listened. From time to time he nodded — from time to time his head fairly spun — but in a few moments he comprehended the Devil's plan.

"You'll find the bottle inside the glove compartment," Satan concluded. "Now, it's time to go. Follow instructions and you ought to be back here, safe and sound, within the hour."

"I still don't understand why you're so confident," Hastings sighed. "That angle on the angel—"

For answer, the Devil closed the plastic bubble over the young man's head and zipped the insulation tight around the interstices. "No more questions," he said. "Time to go. By the way, don't worry if there's a lack of scenery on the trip. You'll be travelling much faster than the speed of light and you'll see nothing except yourself and the vehicle.

But there's not much worth seeing between here and heaven, anyway."

"Sour grapes," muttered Hastings, to himself. Actually, he was badly frightened. The prospect of his journey was far from intriguing — he had no intention, originally, of going to heaven in anything except a nice, comfortable coffin; and that would be in the distant future. But now —

"Off you go!" snapped the Devil. "Pull the lever."

Hastings pulled the lever and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was alone.

Alone.

IT'S a funny word, doesn't mean much to anyone, and didn't to Hastings. Alone is when there's nobody home and you turn on the radio. Alone is when you're sitting at the end of the bar, nursing a drink and wishing you were drinking with a nurse. Alone is looking out of the window on a rainy day and waiting for the telephone to ring, only it's disconnected. Alone is a lot of things.

At least, Paul Hastings had always believed that. But now he found out that alone is — nothing.

That's what he saw when he opened his eyes — nothing. He sat inside the plane, looked out through the sides and top of the plastic bubble, and saw — nothing.

No earth. No moon. No sun. No stars. No clouds. No air. No color.

It was like gazing into a trans-

parent sheet of glass that was also opaque — an endless sheet, without sides, or top, or bottom; a sheet of glass that caught neither reflection nor absence of light. It was like looking into emptiness; an experience probably known to brain surgeons when they open a politician's skull.

Hastings didn't like it. He closed his eyes and waited for it — or the absence of it — to go away. After a moment, he raised his eyelids again.

Nothing, and more of it. Pressing around the bubble, pressing around the walls of the ship as it soared or seared or shredded dimensions in its flight upwards. Only there was no upwards. Paul Hastings was all alone.

He felt no motion, heard no sound. There was only the psychic pressure from outside, the surge of imponderable emptiness.

He felt that unless he thought about something quickly he would go mad; the emptiness would be absorbed into his brain. He tried to think about the Devil and about heaven and about catching an angel, but that seemed madness, too.

So he thought about himself.

Paul Hastings, all alone in outer space, thinking about himself. About the foolish, honest kid who got out of service and decided to use his college training and natural savvy to get into public relations work. About the two years and more of fruitless effort, culminating in

this trip to New Orleans and ending up in the garret.

TWO years ago — two months ago — perhaps even two weeks ago — he would never have thought of calling up the Devil. He had been so honest, so naive. He'd tried so hard to get a job, any job. But the South was a funny place. Everything was "family" and "connections" and "contacts." You had to know somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody who knew Jefferson Davis.

Oh, once in a while, there had been minor assignments; temporary jobs working for some established publicity man during the peak of a campaign. But it had never lasted. And inevitably a crisis would come up when it was necessary to soft-pedal a story, or misrepresent certain facts, or tone down an angle for a client. And Paul Hastings of two years, two months, two weeks ago — fool that he was — would never tell a lie. Not even for a client, not even for business, not even for a buck, not even for a very fast buck.

That, Hastings now realized, is why he had ended up in that garret on Bourbon Street. Fourth floor rear, high above the nightly noises from LaFitte's, Dan's International, Prima's and the other pleasure-palaces. Ten dollars a week in advance to Madam Adam, who ran the place, for the privilege of sitting there and rotting in his honest way.

And that, Hastings also realized, is why he called up the Devil. Perhaps the Mardi Gras was the last straw. The gay carnival had just begun, and four flights down Paul could see the revellers, night after night, laughing and dancing and drinking and spending money; a myriad masked figures. Masked, mysterious, but merry. Nobody could tell rich from poor, honest from dishonest. They all wore masks.

Nobody could tell the true from the false, and nobody cared. So Paul had made up his mind, cast up his spells, called up his Devil, signed up his bargain.

Isolated, eyes elated, Paul thought it all through. Truth and falsehood were relative after all. Two days ago he hadn't believed in the Devil, but now he'd met him. Two days ago he hadn't even been too sure about the existence of heaven as a geographical location—but he was going there.

Come to think of it, according to infernal calculations, he should be arriving shortly. Hastings decided to take a chance and open his eyes once more.

He remembered that his speed exceeded the velocity of light — and it was this factor which would enable his craft to soar over the gates of heaven without being detected. The Devil had told him of the automatic slow-down which would occur once the vessel came into contact with the atmosphere

and the cloudbanks of the celestial realm. The Devil had sneered about that in a fine fashion.

"Heaven is vastly overrated," he had said. "Clouds everywhere. More smog than Los Angeles. As a matter of fact, heaven isn't very much better than Los Angeles—and some Los Angeles folks have told me it's worse. All they have is a strong Chamber of Commerce up there. So don't be disappointed when you arrive. Look for the clouds."

PAUL Hastings looked for the clouds. And suddenly, he saw them. Simultaneously he became aware of motion. "It's because the plane is slowing down," he told himself. His voice sounded hollow as it reverberated against the sides of the bubble. But most of his attention was focussed through his eyes rather than his ears.

He gazed out at endless acres of clouds; white, fleecy clouds made out of lamb's wool, baby bunting, Christmas tree cotton. They were plump bulgy clouds, cuddling up against a blue sky in the best tradition of greeting card artists' handiwork; in a word, heavenly clouds. As a matter of fact, Hastings almost caught a glinting glimpse of golden walls in the distance — almost, but not quite. The clouds intervened, sailing serenely by through celestial space.

Hastings felt the plane easing in, floating down. It was heading, almost as if by volition, towards a



small fragment of cloud that had just become detached from a larger mass; a little isolated island.

The logic of a heavy plane landing on a cloud didn't bother Paul Hastings very much. There was nothing at all logical about the plane itself, or his mission. He knew the plane would land and that was enough.

Now he had to think about the immediate future. How do you catch an angel? — that was the major problem.

How do you catch an angel? Sprinkle salt on its tail? Use a butterfly net? Lasso it by the halo? Take a saxophone under one arm and pretend you're Gabriel?

Hastings didn't know.

"Open the glove compartment," the Devil had said. "And take out the bottle."

As the plane settled down on the cloud-bank, the young man opened the glove compartment and took out the bottle. It was a small bottle bearing a plain label.

"Then press the third button on the panel." The Devil's instructions, again. Hastings decided to obey. He pressed the button.

There was a crackling and a sputtering and a thin, eery whine as of women bawling out their husbands for coming into the house without wiping their feet.

"Hastings!"

The voice cut through the whining with a sudden clarity, and Hast-

ings jumped.

"Don't be frightened, my dear chap," the voice reassured him. "This is just the Devil. Sorry I've only one-way reception set up, so you can't talk back to me. But listen now for the rest of your orders."

Hastings nodded to nobody in particular and bent an ear over the instrument panel.

"Press the fifth button to open the side of the plane," the Devil instructed him. "Step out on the cloud. It's a little damp, but you won't catch cold. They tell me the air of heaven is filled with antihistamine."

"Walk across the cloud until you come to an angel. Then go into your story. If you're as persuasive and convincing as I have reason to believe, you can lure it back to the plane. Then use the bottle and you'll be ready to take off on the up-lever. Better get started now — you have, according to my chronology, seven minutes."

THE voice blended into the crackling and the crackling blended into silence. Paul Hastings blinked, shook his head, squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and—unable to think of any other way of stalling—pressed the fifth button.

The side of the plane opened. A step automatically dropped from the base of the door to the topmost layer of cloud. Paul stepped out and landed up to his ankles in

slush.

So this was heaven!

Slush. Nothing but slush. Hastings moved his feet, lifting them up and down. It was hard going. If you've ever walked on a cloud, you'll understand.

Hastings never had, and he didn't particularly like it. The precious seconds were fleeting by and still he was slogging along. Snowbanks of cloud loomed all around him; it seemed funny that he couldn't see his breath. Icebergs and glaciers floated off in the blue distance, and his little island of cloud drifted away from them. Everything was steeped in snowy silence, everything—

Then he heard it and his feet found wings.

It was music, *heavenly* music. How often he'd heard the phrase, heard it applied to everything from brassy dance-bands to broken-down accordion players. But this was the first time he'd ever heard the reality, and it was *heavenly*.

Little ripples of pure sound that entered the ears, caressed them, and then slid slowly down the spine, melted against his heart. A tune that was soft as a mother's tears, carefree as a child's laugh, buoyant as the breeze on which it was borne.

Hearing it, he could walk in ease and grace. Hearing it, he could no more restrain his pace than his very pulse-beat. Paul Hastings rounded the corner of the cloud and came upon the angel.

The angel, of course, was playing a harp; a small, simple instrument in the Grecian tradition. And the music, close at hand, was even more exquisite.

But somehow, Hastings lost all interest in the music when he beheld the musician.

For the angel was a girl.

To say that she was a blonde is an understatement. To say that her eyes were blue is an insult. To say that her skin was cream-white is absurd. Hastings could see all that for himself, and his own eyes told him that her hair was more golden than the halo above it, her eyes bluer than the sky of heaven, her skin whiter than the angel-wings which sprouted from her back. She was, in a word, a series of *cliches* incarnate; the most beautiful *cliche* ever known.

HE surveyed her carefully, and despite her overpowering beauty he was able to make a critical observation. He noted the sleeveless, almost diaphanous gown she wore, with its television neckline; it seemed finer than silk, more shimmering than nylon. He observed with interest the rakish tilt of the small halo which gave off a concentrated glow similar to that of a strong neon tube. He took cognizance of her large and powerful wings; silver-feathered pinions which sprouted from the shoulder-blades. These were surely not the token wings usually seen on the

angels in the story books — one look convinced him that they were meant for flying and were capable of carrying her weight for great distances.

And yet halo and wings did not detract from her beauty, did not even seem incongruous. They belonged, they were a part of her angelic being, and therefore natural.

But there were one or two features which shocked him. To begin with, the angel's feet were bare — and her nails were not painted! Her fingernails weren't painted, either, and — horror of horrors — the wave in her golden hair seemed natural, as did the coloring! Strangest of all, she wore neither rouge nor lipstick, and there wasn't a trace of eye-shadow or eyebrow pencil!

In all his life Paul Hastings, like millions of other men, had never once seen a beautiful girl who wore no makeup. *That* was the clincher. Wings may be faked, haloes might be contrived, but beauty without make-up was surely impossible to feign. Without doubt, here was proof positive that this girl was a real angel.

He stood there, staring at her silently, and she sat there strumming the harp. Gradually the music increased its potency and appeal; hearing it, Hastings almost forgot his mission. The soaring sweetness invaded his being, absorbed it, so that he seemed to become a part of a vast serenity, a pulsating peace.

Paul Hastings shook his head, shook off the spell. He stepped forward, uttering one of those polite little coughs.

The hands stopped moving, the harp tilted back into the silken folds of the lap, and the music ceased. The angel looked up at him with wide eyes, and then opened her mouth.

Her voice was fresh music, a fresh spell.

"Oh! I didn't know anyone was here. I'm sorry if my music disturbed you."

"It didn't," Hastings said. "I liked it."

"I was just practicing," the angel explained. "I really can't play very well yet — you see, I'm new here. So I like to fly over to one of these outlying clouds, where I can be alone, and rehearse a bit."

She glanced at Hastings curiously. "But you must be new here, too. Why, you don't even have your wings yet!"

"I'm not an angel," Hastings told her.

"You're not? Then what are you doing up here?"

"I get around. As a matter of fact, my dear Miss—"

THE angel roted his hesitation and giggled. "Miss? We have no titles here, you know. You may call me Angela."

"All right, Angela. My name's Paul Hastings, and I happen to be a traveling salesman."

"A traveling salesman in heaven? My, you fellows certainly seem to get around."

"That's progress." Hastings stepped closer, marvelling at her credulity. But, he remembered, all angels are innocent.

"Came in a plane," he explained. "We've got a lot of new developments since you left. Radar, jet-propulsion, atomic bombs. We're really civilized."

"I've often wondered what the world was like these days," the angel sighed. "You see, I left in such a hurry—"

"When was this?"

"We don't talk about such things up here," reproved the angel, gently. "We put aside all worldly memories. And I still don't quite understand why a human being, even a traveling salesman, would venture here."

"Business," Hastings assured her. "Always opening up new territories. And I felt that heaven would be just the place for me. Because of what I'm selling."

He reached over and picked up the harp from her lap. "Take this article, for instance," he said. "Mighty pretty little thing. Brand new, you said?"

"Almost," said the angel.

"Sparkles beautifully." Hastings held it up and inspected it. "But wait a while. Wait until the damp air gets in its work. Pretty soon the finish will begin to tarnish. And

that's where I come in."

"What are you selling?" asked the angel.

"Metal polish!" Hastings proclaimed. "The finest metal polish in the world — in the universe, for that matter. Guaranteed to preserve the sheen and lustre of gold, silver, any precious metal. Ideal for harps, perfect for haloes. Cherubim cry for it!"

"But nothing ever changes here," protested Angela. "I've seen the heavenly choir, and their instruments are always bright."

Hastings considered the statement for a moment. Then he shrugged. "I can see you're new here," he told her. "Otherwise you'd realize that I'm not the first traveling salesman to reach heaven. Why, I'll bet that my company has sold more metal polish up here than anywhere else. No wonder the older angels keep everything bright and shiny! They all use my polish."

"I don't know. It sounds all right, but—"

"Why not take advantage of my free demonstration? Here, step right over to my plane and let me show you a bottle. No charge or obligation."

"Well—"

"Come on!" Paul Hastings reached down and took the angel's hand. An electric tingling ran up his arm and rang a buzzer in his heart.

SHE rose to her dainty feet, then continued to rise. The great

wings spread automatically, and she flapped them slowly, floating forward through the cloud mass. Hastings stumbled along behind her.

In a moment they reached the plane. And here, for one moment, Paul Hastings faced disaster.

It had been the Devil's plan, of course, to have Hastings pose as a salesman of metal polish. He was to lure an angel to the plane, show it the bottle, and entice it inside the bubble. Then Hastings was to slam the door, press the lever, and whizz away. A simple plan—diabolically simple, in fact—and it looked as though it might work. Except for one simple little error.

The angel's wings would never fit inside the bubble!

Hastings surveyed the cramped, transparent compartment, then noted that majestic span of angelic pinfeathers.

"Two minutes left," he reminded himself. But what to do?

"Come over and take a look at the plane," he invited. "I'll get the bottle—it's right inside."

Trusting, the angel permitted him to take her hand and lead her over to the silver cylinder. She gazed at it in pleased wonder.

"Beautiful!" she said. "And to think you could fly all the way up here in this machine."

Paul Hastings walked towards the door and entered the cabin, sliding into position under the domed roof. "Notice how it shines,"

he told her. "That's our polish, of course." Angela ran her hand appreciatively along the silver sides.

"My, it's so light," she marvelled. "I can't see how such a delicate machine could come so far."

"Not delicate at all," Hastings assured. "Here, you can prove it. Just hop up and sit on it. You'll see how easily it bears your weight."

Obediently, without question, Angela flapped her wings and rose in midair. She landed delicately on the top of the plane, right behind the bubble, and settled herself in place with a pleased smile.

Hastings glanced at her through the transparent dome. She was sitting on the plane, all right. And now, he had only to close the door, adjust the automatic insulation, and use the up-lever. Travelling at far greater than the speed of light, the angel would never be able to leave her perch until they reached earth. And it couldn't harm her — you can't, as the Devil had reminded him, kill an angel!

He glanced back at Angela, and for a moment his heart failed him. She was beautiful, innocent, trusting. The thought of her shining radiance disturbed him.

He closed his eyes and another vision of shining radiance came to him — the shining radiance of gold, of silver coins heaped up in stacks and rows. It was a hellish vision, and it drove all thoughts of heaven from his mind.

Still—this was wrong, he mustn't do it — he mustn't.

AT that moment a crackling emerged from the instrument panel and a voice emerged from the crackling.

"What are you waiting for?" grated the voice. "Pull the switch!"

Paul Hastings pulled the switch.

There was a drone, a blur, a moan, a whirr, and then he was back in nothingness. But this time he was not alone.

Glancing back, he saw Angela, still visibly perched on the plane; hair flying, wings flapping, harp dangling wildly from a golden cord looped around her neck. Angela, teetering madly on infinity's brink, her halo askew, her mouth agape. Angela, her face transfixed not by fear but by complete incomprehension.

She couldn't fall, and she didn't. She couldn't speak, and if she could, Hastings would not have been able to hear her. As a part of the moving mechanism that droned through the dimensions and sundered space, she was still visible. But that was all. And the vision of her helplessness again tore at Hastings' heartstrings, until he turned away and examined the instrument panel.

Kidnapping an angel, eh? Well, he was doing it. And he'd get his reward. But why must he feel so guilty?

After all, he wasn't really harming Angela. Matter of fact, this

little trip would probably do her some good. Get her out of a rut. Otherwise she'd be sitting around in heaven for an eternity, with nothing to do but strum her harp.

She was much too pretty to spend the rest of her afterlife as a non-union musician. A girl her age needed a little fun, a little excitement. Once on earth, Angela could get rid of her white nightgown and step into some modern clothes. And she'd never run the risk of catching cold by sitting on a damp cloud all day.

Yes, Hastings was doing her a favor. He closed his eyes and waited for the vessel to hit the gaseous orbit of exhaust fumes, cigarette smoke, factory smog, sewer gas, profanity and atomic radiation which made up the aura surrounding earth.

SLOWLY the space-ship settled down over the world, over the continent, over the country, over the state of Louisiana, over New Orleans parish, over the amusement park, over the topmost track of the roller coaster.

It landed with scarcely a jar.

Hastings pressed the proper button and the side door opened. He stepped out on the track, gazing up at the sky. The moon had moved perhaps an hour's distance across the cloud-gaps, and the entire area around the park was quite deserted. This was a good thing, because there was no one to see him ap-

proach the winged figure which huddled up in the rear of the curious contraption.

"Where are we?" asked the angel, in a small voice. "What happened?"

"On earth," he answered. "Just outside New Orleans, to be exact. That's Lake Pontchartrain over there. And as to what happened—" He hesitated, and a lie formed in his mind. It was a small lie, and if not altogether white, it seemed to be only slightly gray.

"As to what happened," he repeated, "I guess I just pressed the wrong lever by accident. And we came back to earth."

"But this will never do!" wailed the angel. "I've got to return to heaven at once. They'll miss me, and there'll be the very devil to pay."

"The devil to pay," Hastings murmured. "That reminds me—" He glanced around, expecting to catch sight of the friendly fiend. But there was no one in sight. He turned back and regarded Angela.

She was a forlorn little figure, despite her imposing wings, and he felt curiously ashamed of himself. He couldn't bear to tell her the real reason for her presence here—and now, as a matter of fact, he could scarcely bear the knowledge himself. If only he might take her back to heaven and forget about the whole thing—but he couldn't.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I can't take you back. Not just yet, anyway. You see, there's not

enough fuel."

"Oh." She sighed. "But I shouldn't burden you with my troubles. After all, it was an accident, as you say. It's not your fault."

Her smile was sweet, and it stabbed Paul Hastings to the quick—wherever that was. Now, he knew, he could never tell her.

"But what are we doing up here?" asked Angela. "Isn't this an amusement park?"

"Er—yes. Guess I made a slight miscalculation when we landed."

"But why don't we get down? I mean, you weren't intending to spend the rest of the night here, were you?"

"Hardly." Again Hastings glanced around, expecting to see the Devil materialize. But there was only the night and the silence, and the beautiful girl with the wings and the halo.

"Guess we might as well try climbing down," he sighed—and wondered, as he said it, what would happen next. Here he was, just back from heaven and as far as he knew, the first mortal ever to make a two-way trip. The least he might expect was some kind of welcoming committee; if not a brass band, then a chorus of imps and demons. Instead, no Devil, no nothing. And what would he do now with an angel on his hands?

COME to think of it, he had other problems to confront.

The simple one of climbing down from the roller coaster was enough to baffle him momentarily. But Angela solved that. Noting his indecision she rose and extended her hands.

"Grab hold," she invited. "We'll fly down."

And that is exactly what they did, coming in on her wing and his prayer, as he felt himself swoop down through empty air. But in a moment they landed on the ground and Hastings escorted her in the direction of his parked car.

"Climb in and sit down," he suggested. "I want to have a look at that rear left tire of mine. Got a hunch it's flat."

He breathed a sigh of relief as Angela disappeared inside the car. There was no one around but still, a chance night driver might happen by, and the sight of an angel would cause comment. Angels were scarce in this neck of the woods.

Hastings walked around behind the car to take a look at the tire. Yes, it *was* a bit flat; no puncture, but it probably needed a good ten pounds more of pressure. He regarded it thoughtfully for a moment.

"Wonder if we could make it into town all right?" he mused.

"Sure you can."

He whirled at the sound of the unexpected voice. There was no one behind him.

"Climb in," the voice continued, in a sort of rasping whine. "Let's

get moving, brother."

Paul Hastings shook his head violently from side to side, then up and down. As his head went down he noticed the black, furry object crouching at his feet. It was a cat.

"It isn't polite to stare, brother," purred the cat.

"But you spoke to me!"

"There's maybe a law against speaking to you?" the cat asked, twirling its whiskers sarcastically.

"No—I mean—it's just that—"

"Oh, I get it; your mother taught you not to speak to strangers. Well, let me introduce myself, brother. The name is Brimstone. And you're Paul Hastings."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"Not 'on earth'," the cat corrected. "In hell would be more accurate. Because I'm your familiar. The name is Brimstone."

"A talking cat, eh?"

"Not a talking cat. Your familiar. His Nibs sent me."

"I suspected as much. What happened to him? Why didn't he meet me here as agreed?"

"The Devil was called away unexpectedly," the black blasphemy explained. "It seems he had an urgent meeting with Joe Stalin."

"So?"

"So he sent me to keep you company, brother."

"Why must you call me 'brother'?" demanded Hastings.

"Because that's what you are.



I'm your familiar, your brother in damnation."

"But I'm not damned. I didn't sell my soul!"

PAUL Hastings had never heard a cat laugh before. He heard it now, and didn't like it.

"Of course you didn't sell it," the cat chuckled. "But you damned yourself without knowing it by agreeing to steal an angel. Don't you know that's a terrible offense?"

"Never thought of it," Hastings answered.

"Well, you'll have a lot of time to think about it in the future. All eternity, in fact. How His Nibs roared when he told me about the fast deal he'd pulled! You, thinking you were so smart, taking such pains not to sell your soul—and then practically giving it away by agreeing to commit an unpardonable sin! Don't you know that you can't get the best of the Devil in a bargain?"

"Then I'm finished," Paul Hastings sighed, bitterly. "I'm cheated."

"Not at all," Brimstone said, flicking his long black tail in a gesture of deprecation. "You'll still get your money; a bargain's a bargain. And all you have to do is hang on to the angel here until the Big Boy returns tomorrow."

Hastings shivered, and it wasn't because of the night air.

"Come on," coaxed the cat. "Introduce me to the angel. I've never seen one, you know."

"And you're not going to, either!" the young man declared. "Why don't you go away?"

"Because I'm your brother, that's why—and I have orders to go wherever you go. As a matter of fact, the Big Wheel told me to watch you very carefully, just in case you changed your mind about delivering the angel."

"So you're a spy, eh?"

"Right," answered the cat.

Hastings shivered again. The Devil had thought of everything; there would be no turning back for him now. Still, the thought of revealing his treachery to Angela was the worst part of it. He looked for some way out. He turned to the cat with a gesture of appeal and appeasement.

"All right. You have your orders, I suppose. But just do me one favor and we'll get along without any trouble."

"What's the deal?"

"When you're around the angel, pretend that you're just an ordinary cat. Don't talk."

"Suits me, brother." The cat waved its tail in assent. Then it squinted up at the roller coaster in the background. "Which reminds me," purred Brimstone. "I've got a little job to do, first."

"What's that?"

"Can't leave your plane sitting up on top there in sight of everyone, can we? The Big Noise gave me strict orders."

PAUL Hastings sighed. Somewhere in the back of his brain, a plot had been hatching — but now he knew he had merely laid another egg. He'd entertained a wild notion of escaping from the familiar demon, taking Angela to the plane, and somehow discovering how it operated so that he could pilot her back to heaven. But now, with the plane gone—

And it was gone.

Even as he watched, Brimstone turned and meowed up at the moon, then waved his tail in mystic cadence as he whis-purred,

*"Retsaoc rellor otni nrut, enalp!"*

The plane became a roller coaster car once more. Arching his back significantly, Brimstone minced forward towards the door of the car.

Paul Hastings followed. He found Angela sitting patiently in the front seat, her wings folded.

"Sorry to be so long," he apologized. "I had that tire to look at. And besides, I found a stray cat—"

"You did!" The angel smiled, glancing down at Brimstone. "Oh, isn't it pretty — so black and soft — come on, kitty, jump up on my lap. Come on, there we are!"

As Hastings closed the door and started the car, Angela scooped Brimstone into her arms and snuggled him into her lap, petting and stroking the inkblot body. The young man looked, shuddered, but said nothing.

And thus it was that Paul Hast-

ings returned to New Orleans, sitting next to a real live angel holding a real live demon on its lap.

TWO o'clock in the morning, on Bourbon Street, is the time when the amateurs leave and the regulars take over. The marks have goggled at their last floor show; the savages have departed in the taxicabs for attractions in other fields; the tourists have left the bars and hit the mattresses of the Roosevelt, the Jung, the St. Charles or the Monteleone.

And that's when the fun begins. That's when the boys in the band drift across the street and sit in with the rival combo to really beat it out until dawn. That's when the spielers leave the doorways of the night spots and go inside to have a drink with the strippers at the bar. That's when the artists and the Vieux Carre regulars drift into their private patios or the little isolated night spots deep in the heart of the Quarter where aching tourist feet seldom dare to tread. That's when the drinks and the talk gets bigger at LaFitte's.

Tonight, with the Mardi Gras in full swing, it was the same only more so. The Crewes were out in strength, and paraders and spectators alike now met and mingled in masked mirth. Everyone was drunk — drunk on liquor, drunk on dollars, drunk on excitement, drunk on the sheer drama of the carnival.

Canal Street, on the west border

of the Vieux Carre, was deserted as Paul Hastings steered his way through the tangle of confetti, empty pint bottles and full owners of same who still wandered forlornly through the ruins.

Angela peered out of the window. "What's been happening here?" she gasped. "War?"

"Carnival," Hastings explained, shortly. "It's like this every year, they tell me. I wouldn't know. Oh, now what's happened?"

The last remark was addressed not to the angel but to the engine of the car. It wheezed, sputtered, and then seemed to obey some mysterious cease and desist order.

The car swayed to a halt at the entrance to Bourbon Street.

"Out of gas!" the young man sighed. "Come on, we'll have to walk. It's only about six blocks down, more or less."

He opened the car door, then hesitated. For the first time he realized what he was doing. He was coming into one of America's largest cities with a live angel in tow—a live angel, with big wings.

"Wait a minute," he called to Angela. "I—I just want to check that rear tire again." He shot a significant glance at the cat, and Brimstone caught it. Tipping him a wink, the fiendish feline bounded from Angela's lap and sauntered around in back of the car with him.

"A fine mess!" Hastings commented. "Now what do I do? I can't walk an angel down Bourbon

Street."

"Why not?" whispered Brimstone. "There's maybe a law against angels?"

"It isn't that," Hastings sighed. "It's just — oh, how can I explain it? If it happened to be the Devil, now, I wouldn't hesitate for a moment. He'd feel right at home on dear old Bourbon. All I'd have to worry about is that somebody wouldn't take advantage of his innocence."

"What are you worrying about?" sniffed the cat. "Take a look at what gives." He pointed his tail in the direction of the narrow entrance to Bourbon Street.

WHAT gave was simple. Teetering along the edge of the sidewalk and emerging upon the broad expanse of Canal Street was an African Zulu in full war dress, ostrich-plumes waving. The Zulu brandished a knobkerry in one hand and an assegai in the other. Supporting him on either side in his drunken progress was, reading from left to right, a ghost and a crocodile.

"Mardi Gras, stupid!" purred Brimstone. "Everybody's in costume. They'll think she's wearing a costume, too."

Hastings smiled and nodded. "Come on, then. Once we get to my room, our troubles are over."

He walked around the car and helped Angela out and across the curb. The cat trailed primly behind.

"Hope you aren't freezing,"

Hastings remarked. "It's pretty chilly tonight."

"I'm warm enough, thank you," said Angela. Then, "Who are those strange-looking people?"

"Mardi Gras masqueraders. Remember, you're supposed to be one, too. It wouldn't do for them to know that you're a real angel."

"I understand." Angela squeezed his arm. "You're so clever, Paul — the way you think of everything."

Paul Hastings smiled, and the cat gave him an unlauded look.

The crocodile, the ghost and the Zulu gave them scarcely a glance as they passed by and started to walk down Bourbon on the north side of the street. The first block, flanked by the sides of Canal Street stores, was deserted—but up ahead the neon lights blazed fiercely and the mingled shrieking of voices and clarinets rose on what Bourbon Street uses instead of the air.

Angela stared straight ahead and took in a deep breath, compounded equally of bar whiskey fumes, *odeur de oyster-shell*, perfume, perspiration, and fresh garbage—which gives the French Quarter what the Chamber of Commerce likes to describe as a "quaint old world atmosphere."

"Oh!" she sighed. "I'm so excited! You know, it may be sinful of me to even think of such things, but I'm really almost glad you made a mistake and brought me back to earth again. I've missed so much—for instance, I've never been in a

place like this before. As a matter of fact, I've never even stayed up so late! I don't know what's going to happen because I've come down here, but even if I'm punished, it's worth it. Thank you, Paul, for taking care of me like this."

**A**GAIN the young man smiled and the cat returned a soiled grimace—but this time there was pain beneath Hastings' grin. To think that she trusted him; thanked him for taking her to a Bourbon Street garret in the company of a fiend, in order that he could sell her out to the Devil!

"But what else *can* you do?" he asked himself, despairingly. "You can't get her back to heaven. You can't run away with her on earth because Brimstone will follow you. And you can't go away yourself and leave her at the mercy of the Devil — or the local citizens here, who might be worse. No, you'll just have to go through with it. And as long as she's having a good time, you might as well see that she enjoys herself for as long as possible. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow—"

"Nobody dies," whispered the cat, finishing the thought for him. "Not if they obey orders."

"Who said that?" asked Angela.

"I didn't hear anything," Hastings lied. He quaked inwardly, and his heart made seismographic vibrations, as he suddenly realized that

the infernal cat could, and did, read his mind. From now on even his thoughts were known to the Devil. So how could he possibly escape?

They crossed the street, jaywalking over to the southeast corner and continued on down. Now they were passing the garish doorways of bars and dives, dens and dumps, eateries and cheateries. A milling throng was milling and thronging, moving in a frantic orbit between to and fro. A clown rushed hither, two laughing, bottle-spinning *senoritas* ran thither, and a party of men and women in formal evening attire were going yon. There was screaming and shouting, and much tossing of confetti and lunch. Serpentine streamers rained down from the second-story balcony of a private residence, and from either side, bands blared through saloon doorways.

Nobody paid any attention to the young man, the black cat, and the girl in the realistic angel costume.

"She'd be safe here if we could only escape," Hastings told himself. Then, "Damn! I must be careful what I think or Brimstone will be angry."

He glanced down at the cat, but the familiar padded along serenely as though it hadn't caught his thought.

Then Hastings realized a curious phenomenon—the cat couldn't read his mind as long as there were noises around to distract his at-

tention!

"That's something to remember," he told himself. "If the chance ever comes—"

They kept walking, jostling their way through the crowds, exchanging grins and winks at masked revellers, listening to snatches of music and song, shouts and laughter. People were blowing horns, beating on drums, reeling along and singing their praise of Momus, Comus and the other ancient lords of Saturnalia.

Hastings was alarmed, but Angela seemed enchanted. She drank in the raucous shouts as if they formed a melody; she beamed on the inebriate horde as though they were her dearest and oldest friends. Moochers, panhandlers, grifters, steerers, and just plain bums and crooks got the same admiring stare as did the swanky celebrants from uptown. She loved every bit of it because it was life and she was now a part of it. From time to time her wings fluttered in appreciation.

They called to her in passing. "Hi, beautiful!" and "Hello, angel!" and "When did you leave heaven?" They blew horns in her ear and poked at her with canes, and tossed confetti.

But no one questioned her person or her presence here, and Hastings heaved a sigh of relief as they approached the doorway of Madam Adam's establishment, the Blue Pig.

"Thank goodness our troubles

are over!" he exulted. But the black cat merely smiled.

THINGS were warming up inside the Blue Pig. They always did around this time of night, and on this particular evening the atmosphere was particularly torrid. The various permanent guests who occupied apartments, suites, rooms, cubicles or just plain holes in the wall upstairs had all drifted down into the enclosed patio on the first floor, with its small bar presided over by the genial landlady, Madam Adam herself, in the flesh.

Madam Adam certainly had an abundance of flesh to be in. A short crop of dyed red hair surmounted a long, genuinely red face. The face, in turn, rested on two hundred and fifty pounds of foundation, enclosed in a foundation garment. To say that the little Frenchwoman was fat is superfluous—and superfluous fat is hardly a proper description of her imposing bulk.

Madam Adam was more than two hundred and fifty pounds of flesh; she was two hundred and fifty pounds of movement, of quivering, of mirth, of agitation, of excitement. She bounced through life like a big red rubber ball.

Right now she was laughing and beaming fondly on her "guests". All of the regulars were present, and some of them had been present for six or seven hours; many of them glued to the bar stools and many of them just plastered.

Most of them were in costume, and they hardly bothered to look up as Paul Hastings entered the little patio bar flanked by an angel and a black cat.

Only Madam Adam took note of the new arrivals. She hadn't paid much attention to her latest boarder, principally because he, in turn, hadn't paid much rent — but to-night, what with the Mardi Gras spirit and the brandy, she felt cordial in every sense of the word.

"*Alors!*" she greeted the young man. "Is the *habitant* of the garret, I comprehend? And with such charming companionship! Permit me to perform the honors of the house. Come, have to partake of a drink upon me."

Hastings, who was doing his best to head for the back stairs without attracting attention, tried to pull Angela along. But Madam Adam waddled out from behind the bar and wagged her finger at him—together with other portions of her anatomy.

"Please! I insist! Mount upon a stool and construct yourself at home. I am about to confuse up a drink."

"Stuck!" Hastings groaned, under his breath. He smiled at his landlady and beckoned Angela to a bar stool. She sat down willingly enough, and the cat jumped up into her lap. Madam Adam, true to her word, took an enormous shaker and poured the contents of several half-empty bottles into its capacious

maw. Then she shook it violently. Grabbing three glasses at random she filled them from the shaker and then beamed on her young friends.

"Here is dirt in your eye!" she cried. "*A bas le hatch!*" Seeing Angela's puzzled look she added, "Make your bottom up!"

HASTINGS took a swig, and a mixture of brandy, cognac and vodka exploded Bikini-fashion in his stomach. Angela sipped her drink sedately.

"My, it's strong, isn't it?" she said. "I'm so used to drinking nothing but ambrosia or nectar."

"Who necked her?" demanded a raucous voice. A fat little figure in a pirate's costume came up to the bar, followed by a masked clown and a lady who wore a kimono which may or may not have been a costume.

"My dear sir—" Hastings began, but the fat man wasn't having any of that.

"Don't be so formal," he boomed. "It's Mardi Gras, we're all friends here, right? I got that jewelry store over on Royal—seen you pass the place a dozen times. The name is Onyx John."

His friend, the masked clown, put his hand on Angela's arm.

"This heah's a rare pleasuh," he said. "Ah do declah, such a chahmin' lil ole gal! Permit me to intraduce mah self. Dixon's the name — Mason Dixon."

"I know your line," observed Hastings, bitterly. "But please don't rush the young lady—she's a stranger in town."

"That calls for a drink," Mason Dixon told them. "Madam Adam, mix up ancthah round of mint juleps or whatevah mah lil ole friends been havin' here."

"I'm not your lil ole friend," Hastings said. "And I wish you'd go away."

Instead, Mason Dixon and the fat jeweler, Onyx John, sat down on bar stools and regarded Angela with the rapt fascination of wolves running after a Siberian sleigh.

"This drink is making me woozy," Angela giggled. To his horror, Hastings noted that it was doing just that. Even as he watched, Angela's halo tilted forward about an inch and wobbled tip-sily over her head. It was beginning to give off a noticeable glow.

"What's that lil ole thingamajig?" demanded Mason Dixon. "Look, it's shining."

"She's just lit up," Hastings explained. But the two drunken men wouldn't accept his answer. Onyx John noticed the halo for the first time and reacted out a pudgy finger to examine it.

"Quite a costume," he said. "Mighty fine! That looks like real gold to me." His finger probed. "By Arthur Godfrey, it *is* real gold. Twenty-four carat or I miss my guess."

"Of course it's gold," Angela

told him. "I'm a real angel, too."

Paul Hastings stared at her in horror. But the drunks weren't taking her seriously.

"Have another drink," Onyx John chuckled. "Then we'll see."

**H**E stared at her owlishly. "Funny. I can't see where it's attached to your head."

"You can't see any lil ole thing," Mason Dixon chuckled. "You got a load on, man!" He inspected Angela bleakly. "I can't see nothin', eithah. Heah, have a drink."

They drank. The cat shifted uneasily in Angela's lap. Paul Hastings nudged the angel girl. "Take it easy," he said. "This stuff is deadly."

"But I like it," Angela protested. "And I'm having so much fun."

"We've got to get out of here," Hastings insisted.

"But no!" Madam Adam bustled up and caught his remark. "It is that you are my guests. I cannot permit of your leaving. The evening, she is still juvenile. Observe, we are about to make of the music."

Sure enough, Hastings turned and beheld an accordionist entering the Blue Pig, followed by a seedy-looking man who planted himself before the battered piano and proceeded to grow a melody on the keys, watering them from time to time with the sloshed contents of a beer glass.

The accordionist shifted his stomach Steinway into high and

they began to play together.

Onyx John and Mason Dixon banged their glasses on the bar, keeping time. Angela, swept up by the rhythm, fluttered her wings.

"Wow, what a breeze!" Onyx John declared. "Somebody left the door open." Then he noticed Angela. "Hey—are you doing that?" He stared at her closely. "How's it work? You got some wires under your nightie?"

"Of course not," Angela told him, with a seraphic smile. "I just wiggle my shoulder blades. Anybody can do it."

"Real feathers!" Onyx John felt one pinion with a clumsy paw. "Say, I'm beginning to believe you really are an angel."

"Of course I am," Angela beamed. She turned and waved a finger under the jeweler's nose. "Want to see me fly?"

Both she and Hastings were now so preoccupied that they failed to notice the behavior of Brimstone. The cat had crept up on the bar and was lapping up the rest of Angela's drink.

Madam Adam saw the feline for the first time.

"*Eh bien*, observe the pussy!" she cooed. "It believes it is drinking of milk, no?"

**B**RIMSTONE gave her a look of woozy malice. "No!" said the cat. "I believe I am drinking of rotgut. This stuff'd kill a real cat, and fast!"



"*Helas!*" Madam Adam began to quiver rapidly in all directions. Eyes rolling, she gripped Hastings by the shoulder. "The puss—do you not hear of it speaking to me?"

"No," Hastings lied. "I don't hear anything."

"You must be drunk," the cat told her. "You know darn well I can't talk."

"Oh," said Madam Adam, reassured.

"But I heard!" Onyx John wheeled suddenly. "Say, just what's coming off here? A talking cat, and a gal with wings like an angel—what gives?"

"Yes," added Mason Dixon. "And bless mah lil ole soul, if she isn't carryin' a hahp."

"A what?"

"A hahp."

"He means 'harp', stupid!" the inebriated cat explained.

"You play the harp?" asked Onyx John. "Where?"

"Why up in —"

"— up in Shreveport," Hastings finished, quickly. "And that reminds me, we've got ten minutes to make a train. Come on, Angela, let's go!" He tugged her from the bar-stool, but the slightly flushed angel was too excited to pay attention. She took the harp from around her neck and, after noting the beat of the pianist and accordionist, began to accompany them in a perfect rendition of their current selection—which happened to be "Basin Street Blues."

"Good Lord!" gasped Onyx John. "I never heard anything like *that* before!"

"She *is* an angel!" agreed his companion.

"*C'est incroyable,*" wheezed Madam Adam.

"Not bad at all," hiccuped the cat.

And their comments were justified. Because when Angela let loose with her harp, boogie beat or no, things happened. The celestial tones filled the ears of the listeners and came out of their eyes in the form of moisture.

Within half a minute the women, the regular patrons in the background, the accordionist, the pianist, and the group at the bar were all contributing to a puddle of tears.

Crying with delight, they harkened to the harpist. Paul Hastings sniffled, then realized this was his one chance of escape. Noting the rapt absorption of all present, he seized the opportunity to take Angela by the arm. "Come on," he whispered. "Now let's make a break for it out of here."

"Where are we going?" whispered the girl, without missing a note.

"To my room, of course."

"And where's that?"

"Four flights up," Hastings told her. "It's a long climb, but I can't help it."

"I can," said Angela. Still strumming the harp, still smiling serenely, Angela fluttered her wings. "Grab

hold," she commanded.

HASTINGS, having no other choice, grabbed hold. Brimstone leaped from the bar and landed on Angela's shoulder. Still playing, still entrancing the drunken audience with a magic born of immortal melody, the angel flapped her wings and rose from the ground.

Straight up in the air she went, carrying Paul Hastings and the cat with her. Up above the palms of the patio, past the second and third story windows—Angela reached the fourth floor, swooped lightly over to the glass pane high in Hastings' garret, and pushed it open.

Madam Adam, mouth agape in astonishment, eyes blurred by a combination of tears, brandy, cognac and vodka, watched the flying trio disappear into Hastings' tiny room. The music faded and died.

"Maybe she *is* an angel!" whispered Onyx John.

"Maybe we're goin' crazy!" gurgled Mason Dixon.

"Maybe we should imbibe of another drink," sighed Madam Adam.

And that's just what they, and the rest of the patrons of the Blue Pig, proceeded to do. In fact, fortunately for Paul Hastings and his little bundle from heaven, the patrons proceeded to drink so quickly and so much that within an hour they had managed to completely forget the whole incident. No one was certain of just what had been seen and heard, and memory of the

episode was submerged in alcohol.

By the time the sun rose over Bourbon Street and cast a disapproving eye on the Blue Pig, its occupants had drifted away to dreamland. Which is as good a place to leave them as any...

AS for Paul Hastings, he would just as soon have stayed in dreamland forever. But when he opened his eyes the following afternoon and rose from the armchair in which he had slept, he realized that things were not solved that simply.

Angela lay on the bed, wings folded sedately over the side. Brimstone nestled alongside her—and it was obvious that she hadn't heard the cat conversing last night, because she still cuddled the tiny fiend closely to her bosom.

There they were, the angel and the demon, ready to face the coming day—or the coming night. For twilight was slipping and getting ready to fall.

Hastings tiptoed down the hall to the community washroom and shaved. He hated to look at himself in the mirror — hated to see the face of the man who was going to betray an angel to the Devil.

But nothing had altered overnight. Sleep had not knit the unravelled sleeve of his care. His care didn't have any sleeve; it was like a straightjacket that bound him in its grip no matter how he struggled and raved.

He couldn't face his face, and he couldn't face his problem. He still had to go through with it, like it or no. The angel was on earth with no way of returning, and he was scheduled to play a long future engagement in Hell. Meanwhile, eat, drink and—

"Be wary," purred a familiar voice from behind him. Brimstone had tiptoed through the door. "Good afternoon, brother. Getting yourself slicked up for Old Nick?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that come sundown, we're off to see the Big Dealer. Just got a telepathic communication a moment or so ago—woke me up. We're going out to keep a date with him over in Jefferson Parish. If you listen, I'll tell you how to get there."

Hastings listened — what else could he do? — and the cat gave him the route to follow.

"No tricks, now," warned Brimstone. "This is a very important matter to the Big Casino. I'll be watching every move you make and one slip—" The cat drew its tail across the black throat and made a snicking noise.

Hastings cut himself on the lip with the razor and nodded soberly. "All right," he said. "I'll go through with it. But in return, remember — no more of that talking. I can't bear to have Angela find out what you are."

"Or what you are," purred the cat. "I understand. Come on, let's

wake her."

They returned to the garret, but Angela was already sitting up and stretching her wings.

"How do you feel?" asked Hastings, solicitously.

"Just heavenly," the angel told him. "My but we had fun last night, didn't we, Paul?"

"Oh — sure. You have no hang-over or anything?"

"Certainly not. Look at the way my halo is shining."

PAUL looked and a glow brighter than that of the halo suffused his being. She looked very young and very lovely there, and he opened his mouth to tell her the truth — but Brimstone arched his back and hissed, and his tail formed a big black question mark.

"Come on," Hastings said. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"For a ride." He felt like cutting his tongue out, but there was no escape. "Thought maybe we could see the sights."

"Fine." Paul opened the door. "Is the cat coming too?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so." The cat ran past him and led the way to the back stairs.

"Good idea," Hastings noted. "We'll take this route and avoid being seen."

They tiptoed down the stairs and into the twilight. Hastings stationed Angela and the cat in the doorway. "I forgot!" he exclaimed. "The car

is somewhere on Canal. Now what?"

"Taxi, Mister?"

The harsh voice came out of nowhere. Paul Hastings blinked as a redfaced man suddenly bobbed up in the doorway.

"Well — I don't know — we'd planned on going for a ride, but—"

"I know just where to take you," leered the cabby. He tilted his cap slightly and Hastings caught a glimpse of two little black horns growing out of his forehead. "I've come to get you specially," the cabby continued. "Understand?"

"Yes." Hastings beckoned to the girl. "We might as well go."

The redfaced cabby led them to a red cab—certainly unlike any other cab Hastings had ever seen in town—and the trio of animal, human and angelic beings settled themselves on the back seat.

The cab bounced down Bourbon, out Esplanade, and away. Soon the city stretched behind them in the dusk, and the silver sweep of the Huey Long Bridge shimmered in the distance to their left.

"Lovely," Angela exclaimed. "I'm so glad I came. You know, I scarcely remembered how wonderful it was to be alive — and what I missed when I left earth."

"Look, honey," Paul began. "I may be out of line, asking this, but I'm still interested. What were you, I mean when you were alive, and what happened to you when—" He stopped, embarrassed.

ANGELA drew in her lower lip and the hint of a furrow ploughed its way across her brow. "It isn't considered right to talk about the past up there, you know. But I've been back on earth for almost a day now, and nobody seems to have noticed anything, yet."

"I wondered about that," Hastings admitted. "Here you are, AWOL, and I should think somebody would be worried about you."

"Well, I'm not worried. Maybe it's wrong for me to say it, but I'm glad you brought me back. I like it here. Why, I've had more fun in the last day than I had in the whole twenty years that I was—"

She paused and looked away into the darkness rushing past outside the cab.

"Go on," whispered the young man.

"There's really nothing to tell. I was just a girl, an ordinary girl living in an ordinary small town. I went to high school, lived with my folks, and when school ended I got a job. It was the last year of the war, and the government had a big chemical factory outside of town. So I worked there, and one day was like another.

"I never went out on dates, because all the young fellows were in service. I used to wish I'd meet somebody some day—somebody to talk to, to have fun with. Somebody," and here her voice dropped, "like you, Paul."

Hastings shifted uneasily in his seat, but the angel came closer.

"As a matter of fact, that's what I was wishing when it happened."

"What happened?"

"The explosion. At least, I guess that's what it must have been. Because when I woke up again—" She made a little gesture that managed to include the robe, the harp and the halo.

"That's all," she said. "Maybe I shouldn't have told you, but I feel better now, whatever happens."

"Whatever happens." Hastings stuck out his jaw. He glanced down at Brimstone, but his jawline remained firm. "All right. I've got something to tell you, too—whatever happens. It's about me, and the reason you're here. Angela, here's the truth. You're not back on earth by any accident. Right now we're on our way to—"

"Quiet, brother!"

Brimstone rose from the angel's lap and glared.

She stared at the cat and her mouth formed a little red hole filled with astonishment.

"You're talking!"

"Of course I'm talking. And you listen to me, not to my servant."

"Your servant?" Paul cried. "But you're supposed to be *my* servant!"

THE cat chuckled, and each note tingled against Hastings' spine. "Do you think for one moment that the Big Gun would trust you that far? He planned all this,

and he knew something would happen with a weakling like you. That's why we're taking no chances."

"Betcha!" The cab-driver turned around and thrust his red mask over the seat. His hat had slipped off, and the two knobby black horns rose in menacing spires from his rounded forehead. "We've got you right where we want you, and you'd better keep your mouth shut!"

"Paul! What's happening? What kind of a creature is this?" gasped the angelic girl.

"I'm not a creature," snarled the cab driver. "I'm a hard-working, respectable demon."

"And I'm a hard-working, respectable fiend" the cat told her. "The only phoney in the crowd is this weak-kneed mortal, whose soul belongs to Satan."

"But I don't understand—"

"You will, soon enough. And if you don't believe that he's sold you out lock stock and halo to the Devil, you can ask His Unholiness himself in about five minutes, when you see him!"

Angela turned to Hastings. "No!" she whispered. "Say it isn't true — it can't be true." Hastings averted his eyes as she continued. "What does the Devil want of me?"

"I don't know," he answered. "That's the truth, Angela. I really don't know. And I'm trying to explain to you how it all happened, but—"

"Not another word," rasped Brimstone. "Or I'll claw your eyes

out."

Hastings ignored the cat. He gripped the angel by the shoulders. "Haven't you some power to overcome evil?" he muttered. "Isn't there something about this you can do?"

She shook her head, halo and all. "Not, on earth. I have no power here. You're the only one who can save me."

"Then I'll save you!" Hastings threw himself back and opened the door of the moving cab. "Quick — jump for it! Spread your wings and fly!"

"No you don't!" The cat barred the way, back arched, claws extended, eyes twin fountains of flame.

Paul Hastings faced the cat, ready to do battle, but Angela grabbed his arms.

"Don't, Paul. I know you didn't mean to get me into this fix, but we're in it together, and I won't leave you now. Whatever happens, we'll both stay together and see it through."

"That's the spirit," approved the cat. "Close the door, brother — we're almost there."

THE cabby drove like a demon (and who had a better right?) and they whirled along a side-road, over a slight rise, and descended to a private driveway. At the end stood a vast, deserted barn-like structure; its unlighted windows staring like blind eyes into the

night.

They passed under an arch that had once borne an incandescent sign. Paul Hastings could just make out the lettering.

"DEAL ME INN," he read, aloud. Then, "I know where we are! This used to be a gambling casino, but it's closed now."

"Not to the Devil," the cat explained. "He's a good friend of the owner. Borrowed it for the meeting."

The cab stopped on a hypothetical dime before the unlit entrance to the DEAL ME INN and the cabby ran around to the side and opened the door. Brimstone and Angela stepped out, then Hastings. The cabby grabbed his arm.

"Not so fast," he said. "That'll be three bucks, even."

"You mean on top of everything I have to *pay* for the ride?" Hastings complained.

"Why not? Even a demon's got to eat," the cabby explained. He opened his mouth and for the first time displayed the long ivory razors of his teeth. "Unless, of course, you'd like to see me scrounge around for my own food."

Paul Hastings paid him quickly, without a word.

"All right, let's get going." The cabby stepped to the darkened doorway, followed by Brimstone, who kept his slitted eyes upon the mortal and the immortal alike.

"Got a key?" the cat demanded.

For answer the cabby bent his

head forward and slipped one knobby horn into the door lock. There was a grating click and the door swung open upon a black abyss.

They moved forward slowly into the barn-like building. The DEAL ME INN had been a typical gambling casino in its gaudy day; half a block long and almost again as wide — an expanse built on the general dimensions of a roller rink.

In the darkness, Hastings' eyes gradually discerned the dim outlines of the covered green tables, the roulette wheels shrouded by dust-cloths, the octagonal poker and black-jack layouts, the empty chuck-a-luck cages. He could almost imagine the casino as it had used to be; alight and alive with hundreds of gambolling gamblers, dozens of dealers, spotters, steerers; he could hear the shouts, the murmurs, the invocations and imprecations directed to Fortune, mingled with the clink of silver and the rich rustle of greenbacks.

But now it was quiet, quiet and dark. They stumbled along through the sable silence, with the cat's eyes to guide them in the gloom. The cat's eyes — and the cabby's, which were worse. They glowed redly as Hastings and Angela tiptoed along up to a platform at the end of the room. They mounted it and stood staring out at the empty expanse of the casino. It held nothing but darkness.

THEN, suddenly, the darkness was dispelled by a glow, a gleam, a glare from the eyes of a thousand cats, a thousand cabbies. As if on signal, the entire casino was filled with rubies, living jewels that floated in pairs six feet or more from the floor.

There came a murmur and a whisper, a grumble and a growl, and beneath it the sulphurous sussuration of baleful breathing.

"The boys have arrived," grunted Brimstone. Hastings strained his eyes to see that which he did not desire to behold; but it was no use. All he saw was the eyes—hundreds and hundreds of red eyes ravening in darkness.

They stood on the platform and Angela shivered close to him. The cat hissed and the cabby had disappeared now, disappeared to join the black brotherhood on the floor below.

"This is it," Brimstone purred.

This was indeed it, or rather, him.

He came out of darkness, out of nothingness, out of the everywhere into the here. One minute the platform beside them was empty and the next it was filled; filled with a red and raging fire that shimmered and seared, then coalesced into a cohesive flame. The flame sent out six shoots — two arms, two legs, a head and a tail.

Glowing, literally glowing, with pleasure, the Devil stepped forward on the stage.

"Meeting will please come to order," he mumbled. "And all that sort of rot."

A cheer arose from the darkness, but the Devil raised his tail for silence.

"No time for nonsense," he drawled. "Right down to business here. We've work to do." For the first time he turned to Paul Hastings and a smile lit up his fiery countenance. "I see you've brought our angel," he said. "Good!"

"Not so good." Each word was a dead weight forced up from deep down inside him, but Hastings managed. "I'm not going to let you harm her."

"Harm her? But my dear chap, I have no intention of harming her—none whatsoever! I merely want to sketch her!"

"Sketch her?"

"Precisely," answered the Devil. He extended his tail in Angela's direction. Flame shot from the tip, a circle of flame that limned her beauty and made it visible to all the hungry eyes down in the darkness. He traced the angel's outline in fire.

"That's a hot sketch!" wheezed Brimstone, from somewhere down around Paul Hastings' feet.

**H**ASTINGS stared at the girl—angel as she stood within the circle of fire, noted that her halo still glowed with a luminance of its own. That alone gave him a faint irrational vestige of hope.

A chorus of hoots and howls greeted the glowing apparition of the angel on the platform.

Satan stepped forward again and signalled for silence with his all-purpose caudal appendage.

"I told you chaps I had a surprise," he began. "And here it is! Yes, I assure you it's quite real. A real angel."

Again the yammering from the infernal legions. Again the signal for silence.

"At this time," said the Devil, "I should like to express my personal appreciation to Mr. Paul Hastings, who has gone to great lengths—literally moved heaven and earth, as it were—to supply us with an angel. I am sure we all tender Mr. Hastings our very warmest regards."

"But I don't want your warm regards," Hastings protested.

"You'd better get used to the heat, brother," observed Brimstone. "When you're one of us, you'll get a lot of it."

Angela was staring at the young man from within the circle of fire. He couldn't meet her eyes. Better to face the Devil himself than that. So he faced the Devil.

"You can't harm her," he gasped. "You can't!"

"I could," Satan answered. "But I won't. As I said, I merely want to sketch her. But you'll understand everything, if only you'll cease this—pardon the expression—infernal racket, and listen to what I am about to tell the audience."



The Devil stepped forward and stood poised on the cloven hoof. The omnipresent tail flicked forward and pointed at Angela.

"Why is the angel here?" he asked. "And why the mortal man? The answer is also the answer to one of my most cherished dreams. For I must confess it, I too have my dreams. How often have I twisted and turned on my bed of coals o' nights, envisioning this moment—the moment when I could exchange my dominion over demons for sovereignty o'er angels!"

"Did I get your double-talk right?" spluttered Brimstone, indignantly. "Did you say you were going to chuck us fiends and get angels instead?"

"Exactly!" Satan smiled.

A low groan rose from the darkness, gathering into a rumbling roar of protest. Once more the Devil stilled it with the talisman of his tail.

"But wait! You're not abandoned. My dream runs thusly; to procure an angel, inspect it at first-hand, study its celestial metabolism, analyze, and reproduce its veritable aspect by means at my command. Then I shall reproduce it, reproduce it a thousand-fold, by creating in essence an authentic disguise. A disguise all of you present will wear. You, all of you, shall become my angels!"

Laughter screeched upwards, slashing the darkness into shrieking ribbons.

"'Tis not a jest. Angels you'll become, al of you, properly attired in robes, of whitest damask. Wings will sprout from your backs, haloes glitter above your heads. And thus accoutred, you'll have all earth to walk—all earth to rule."

THERE was a certain majesty in Satan's utterance that Hastings could not help but acknowledge; the grotesqueness of the entire nightmare became real when embodied in that ancient evil voice. He puzzled over it as the Devil continued.

"Aye, that's the dream, and this is the realization of it! To own an angel, copy it, superimpose its shape on fiends, and then loose them upon earth!

"And that's where mortal help is needed. For we live, as you know, in a decadent age. No longer do most miserable humans seek me out for black boons or sell their souls for favors. We, all of us—the legion of the damned—are passe, if you please: 'old hat' and 'figments of the imagination' to the vulgar. But there are many mortals who likewise scoff at heaven and its works, who have discarded seraphim and cherubim from their new theology.

"So I have contrived a way of snaring these skeptical souls. A modern, mortal way, with modern, mortal help. You fiends disguised as angels will not walk the earth as such: no, one step further is

contemplated. You will appear as robots in the shape of angels, and you'll not be *given* to the mortals—you'll be *sold*!"

The Devil paused to allow the meaning of his words to sink in. But even Hastings was puzzled, until Satan continued.

"Yes, sold! By the modern magic of advertising. By the modern deviltry of a human invention called 'public relations' which is far fouler than anything I could devise.

"This young man here," and the Devil indicated Hastings, "is an expert in this evil art. With certain monies I have obtained from the former owner of this gambling—you'll pardon the expression—hell, he will proclaim to the world that he has launched a new business. Using the powers of air and darkness united in mortal sins called radio, television, and newspapers, he will let it be known that he has invented and is manufacturing a new kind of robot—a mechanical servant.

"It is a robot, he will tell the world, that is attuned by electronic impulse to the brain-waves of the individual. It is a robot that acts as a part of the brain itself, independent of the body, and serves as a mechanical monitor. In other words, a friendly advisor, wiser than the mind itself, who will direct the efforts of the individual to praiseworthy and profitable ends. A mechanical conscience. Truly, a Guardian Angel!"

**A**GAIN the Devil paused and waited for his meaning to permeate the darkness behind the red and winking eyes.

"Yes, a Guardian Angel! What man would not welcome the latest scientific miracle—a second brain attuned to his own, a brain that is guaranteed to keep him from harm, keep him from evil action, direct him to pleasure, peace, security, and (since we are dealing, remember, with human beings) profit?

"Not every man, of course, will be able to afford the luxury of a Guardian Angel. A thousand, perhaps, will be in a position to buy. From the flood of requests which I anticipate, we shall select that thousand. A thousand of the highest-minded, noblest men and women of the world; a thousand we could never hope to reach by any other enticement. They will come to us willingly, pay this young man handsomely, for the privilege of undergoing an electronic-psychoanalysis and having a personal Guardian Angel constructed to guide them! Savor the delicious humor of it all—they'll heap a fortune on this young man to obtain a Guardian Angel, and the Guardian Angel will be one of you in disguise!

"Can you imagine how you will guard your human charges? How you will direct their destinies? How you will act as a Conscience and rule their actions?

"Within a year, those thousand mortals who possess you will have

the world turned topsy-turvy. Their damnation will in turn damn millions of others, in a widening circle of corruption. War, pestilence, red ruin—and all of us in power!”

They understood, now, and the screams rising from the darkness clawed along Hastings' spine and burrowed into his brain. For he understood now, too; knew how he would get rich on the Devil's dream, and at what cost to himself and the world.

“Begone!” Satan continued. “Avant! And—for the benefit of you newcomers who have never sat at the feet of Avon's Bard, scam out of here! When next I call you, it will be to don the angelic robes. But now, farewell, fare ill!”

The eyes winked out like fire-flies dying in the darkness, and Satan turned to Angela and Hastings on the platform,

“There you have it,” he said. “My dream, your riches. It is a simple scheme, but sound. We live in an age where the wildest fantasy of yesterday is but today's commonplace. Now, I shall instruct you fully in your duties.”

“Don't bother,” Hastings murmured.

“What's this? Do I detect a note of insubordination in your voice?”

“In plain English,” Hastings said, “I advise you to go to hell.”

“Home?”

“Call it that if you like. But I won't cooperate. Take me with you if you wish—I understand from Brimstone that you've tricked me into losing my soul anyway, so I might as well go. But I'm not going to stay here and act as front man for your dirty schemes!”

HASTINGS faced Angela. “Now you know what I did,” he said. “I'm to blame for everything, and there's nothing I can say to help you now. Except that I'd count myself well damned if only all this had never happened to you.”

Angela mustered a smile. “I know,” she answered. “And it's not your fault, really. You *did* try to protect me, once you realized the truth. And you're sorry, now. I—I still have faith in you, Paul.”

The Devil tugged at his spade beard, and a sardonic grin flared forth and glowed.

“Very touching,” he commented. “So you'd refuse to help me, now that plans are all arranged?”

“Why not?” Hastings retorted. “I've found out one thing—there are limits to what I'll do for money. Besides, why should I help you? I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't.”

“Shall I tell you why you should help me?” asked Satan, gently. “Shall I tell you why you are going to help me, willingly, as much as I wish?”

“Why?” asked Hastings, in spite

of himself.

For answer, the tail reared itself towards Angela.

"That's the reason," the Devil said. "I told you no harm would befall her, and I meant it. All I need do is use her as a blueprint on which to pattern my angelic disguises; study her, copy her, and release her. So go my plans.

"However, if you prove stubborn and refuse to cooperate—I'll not stop there. I'll not release her. I'll drag her down beyond your reach, beyond the reach of heaven itself, to mine own kingdom!"

There was a moment of pregnant silence which soon gave birth to horrified realization of his words.

"Now," snapped Satan. "What say you? Will you cooperate? Or—"

Hastings glanced at Angela. "No," whispered the angel. "You can't consent! I'll be all right, I'd gladly go with him rather than let him do this to the world. Don't do it, Paul."

"I must," Hastings sighed, "I owe it to you."

The Devil smiled. "Then we're agreed! We start tomorrow to make plans. Money shall be provided. This place will be transformed, outwardly, into a factory. I, unfortunately, cannot attend you in this matter—there are wars to be waged elsewhere, requiring my presence. But Brimstone will remain with you as my own personal representative. He shall give counsel, lend his aid.

One month is all I require; at the end of that time, Angela is free and you will be rich. It can all be arranged very quickly if you follow the plan, and Brimstone.

"Within a month, then—GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED will be launched upon the world!"

THE month passed swiftly; too swiftly. It passed in a blur, passed in a kaleidoscope, passed in a whirlwind of activity, unreality, and pure nightmare. It was all a dream—indeed, a diabolical dream come true.

The money was on the table in the garret when they returned; thousands of dollars in nice, crisp bills. Hastings never saw the gambler who provided it; he saw nothing but Angela's predicament and his own, talked to no one about it but Brimstone.

For Brimstone was always present, always on hand to break up any opportunity to discuss an escape or a solution. At first Hastings entertained a wild hope that heavenly powers might somehow take note of this blasphemous scheme and intervene; as the days passed without a sign, his hopes faded.

And then the mad whirl took over. The gambling casino, made over in Hastings' name now, became a factory to all outward appearances. GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED was really incorporated. Hastings moved to a suite of offices

uptown, and he and Angela shared a suite in a hotel; Brimstone chap-eroning, of course.

The presence of an angel caused comment, naturally, and Hastings capitalized on that. He swung into action as a public relations man.

No, Angela was not an angel. She was a robot, a mechanical creation. Yes, he was the inventor. No, there was nothing at all supernatural about this electronic development. Plastic body, synthetic flesh, a mechanism intricately contrived. Secret formula? Well, he couldn't say just yet. But manufacturing had started and within a month he would be ready for an important announcement.

Thus for the *Times-Picayune* and the *New Orleans Item* and the AP and the UP and the INS, and for the eager beavers from *Time* and *Life* and *Newsweek* who tried without success to get past the barbed wire and into the factory, who tried to ferret out the details of Hastings' singularly anonymous past, who tried to interview Angela alone, who speculated and puzzled and scoffed and predicted and hinted until the entire nation, the entire world had heard about this mysterious GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED that was about to revolutionize human life.

The pastors denounced and the scientists screamed and the commentators yelled. Within two weeks the airwaves were polluted with angel jokes, twelve songwriters had

turned out numbers with the word "angel" in the title, three movie studios were working on quickies embodying the angel theme, and the firms that specialized in making toys with Hopalong Cassidy tie-ups were bidding for rights on angel dolls, angel dresses, angel wings, and angel sub-machine guns.

AT first it was all a gag, something to talk about, something to feed the readers and the listening audience; a new distraction from war and worry. At first it was a wild rumor, a bad joke, a crazy notion. Then, as pictures of Angela appeared, complete with wings and halo—as the newsreels and the television screens showed carefully-staged interviews which ended with Angela actually flying through the air—then and only then did people begin to wonder. And wondering, believe.

Yes, people believed. They believed because they wanted to believe.

Paul Hastings, working as he had never worked before, working as no publicity or advertising man had ever worked—with a genuine product to sell—began to find out things about his fellow-man.

Of course he was still cynical about motives. Folks, he realized, were out after the dollar. They were gullible, easily deceived.

But that had nothing to do with their belief in GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED. They

had faith in the notion because they wanted to have faith. The whole world, he discovered, was searching for security. Security against others, and security against themselves.

For as the campaign moved into high, Hastings dispelled the element of mystery. Working with Brimstone's coaching, he gradually "planted" stories and interviews in the proper places.

He began to "explain" the theory behind GUARDIAN ANGELS; gave out releases dealing with the idea of a mechanical brain acting as a conscience which could do no wrong.

Using scientific gobbley-gook coated with metaphysical jargon, he let it be known to all the world that there *was* a solution to mankind's problems after all—a solution far beyond orthodox religion, orthodox science, beyond the psychiatric approach. A thousand GUARDIAN ANGELS would soon be available for use: a thousand people would be initially selected as a mass experiment to undergo conditioning which would make them eligible to employ a personal Conscience.

Statesmen, scientists, military and religious leaders, business men, creative artists were invited—if they could pay the fee, of course—to participate in this earth-shattering new development which might logically result in a new and better world.

The response convinced Hastings beyond all doubt that the world was

basically a far better place than he had dreamed; that people were far better than he'd ever imagined.

For the letters and requests poured in. Letters from the great, letters from the rich, letters from the high and mighty of the world. They came in a steady stream, the stream became a torrent, but the torrent was merged in the oceans of mail and communications from ordinary men and women.

THE poor wrote. The sick wrote. The broken in spirit and the despairing, the lost and lonely ones. "I haven't got much money, but if there's only a chance, you see my father is a good man but he's got an awful temper and he beats up on my mother and us kids all the time and if he had one of those angels now, well—"

"I never knew it," Hastings told Angela, over and over again. "I never realized it. People really *want* to be good, they'll do anything to be good. It's only that they don't know *how*. They're weak, bewildered, afraid of themselves. All they want is peace and security—these letters show that.

"I don't have to sell this idea to the world. The world wants to buy it. People know what's wrong with each other, and with themselves. If only it were true!"

This last thought always brought Hastings up short. Again and again, during the last few days, he told Angela, "We must think of some

way out. We *must!* We can't let this thing go through!"

And Angela only smiled. "I have faith, Paul," she said. "You must have faith, too."

Which was poor consolation, whenever Hastings got through with yet another session of lies to the press, or returned from another conference with Brimstone.

The fiendish cat was exultant. "Wonderful!" he purred. "Everything going according to schedule. They think we're turning out angels at the factory, and when the time comes we'll produce 'em right as promised. We'll select our thousand suckers, run them through that silly test with the machines I'm rigging up; give them three days of buzzing noises and electric arcs straight out of those old mad-scientist movies. And then we tell them they've passed, the adjustments are made synchronizing them with the robots, and they'll get their angels. Oh, will they get theirs!"

The cat chuckled, and Hastings shuddered. He shuddered still more during the last two days.

For it was then that anticipation mounted to almost unprecedented heights; the papers abandoned their panic over wars and rumors of wars and concentrated on Hastings, the miracle-man, the man who was going to solve the problems of the world.

April 1st was the deadline; and it almost became, in the popular

mind, "National Angel Day."

ON March 31st came the crowning event—the personal phone call from the White House, asking for a private conference, followed quickly by a secret invitation from the UN to address the delegates at Lake Success. The highest powers, aroused at last, were in one accord—if the world could beg, borrow or buy a Conscience for its leaders, then government would pay the price.

FBI was moving in. A special plane landed at Maisant International Airport, ready to transport Hastings, Angela, and Brimstone—"My mascot," as Hastings always told the press—to the capitol. Before the historic meeting, still other initial-studded authorities made their request. NBC, CBS, ABC wanted a combination radio and television broadcast to the world from the airport.

Oh, it was a crazy month, and no mistake. Angel-food cake became a popular article of diet. *The Wall Street Journal* hinted at a communist plot, and the *Daily Worker* muttered about capitalist conspiracy. The Kiplinger letter dealt with a rumored "mass production of angels in the low-price field by GM, with models scheduled to go on sale in chain stores throughout the country." Bookstores sold Modern Library editions of *Look Homeward, Angel* to the profit of Thomas Wolfe's estate; little theatre groups

were playing *Angel Street* in revival, and the usual idiocies of popular taste were again demonstrated.

But over and above it was the White House request, the UN meeting, the radio broadcast, and the unleashing of the Devil's dream upon the world.

A haggard Hastings, eight pounds lighter than the month before, rode in an unlicensed automobile to the airport. Brimstone sat snugly, smugly, on his lap—Brimstone wasn't taking any chances, with the FBI man driving and the two network vice-presidents in the back seat. Angela sat between them, peering forward at Hastings, and trying to act like an angelic robot for the benefit of the other passengers.

"Mind if we touch it?" asked the first v. p., nervously, as he poked Angela with a stubby finger.

"My, feels just like flesh!" commented his companion. "And those wings—it really flies, doesn't it?"

"Careful," cautioned the driver, an FBI man who had seen too many Lloyd Nolan movies. "I've got my orders, remember — no tampering with the angel. Security measure."

"This all seems incredible to me, Mr. Hastings," worried the second v. p. "Now about that broadcast. It's scheduled for 2 PM, right before your take-off, and if you'd only consent to use our script, we'd be okay. I mean, we've had the very best staff men in to do the writing, and it's timed down to the split second."

"No script," Hastings muttered, grimly. "As a matter of fact, I have no idea what I'm going to say."

**B**RIMSTONE'S claws dug into his ribs in silent, painful reminder that he'd better say the right thing, and Hastings subsided in his seat.

"Beats me how you do it," marvelled the first v.p. "I hope you'll explain everything over the air. I mean, how you get this halo effect, and the reason for the harp and stuff like that."

"I get it," mused the second v.p. "Actually, he could of made any kind of robot he wanted; man, or woman, or one of these metal men. But the angel idea, that ties in with most peoples' notion of what a conscience looks like—get it? The old symbolism! Mighty clever! You're going to make a fortune with this idea, Mr. Hastings."

"You're going to make History!" breathed his companion.

Hastings nodded.

Yes, he was going to make History, all right. Had there ever been a more fantastic situation in all the world, in all the age-old war between heaven and Satan? He, one man, held the balance now—and he'd be holding it, in just a few moments, before the eyes of all the world, the ears of all the world.

Eyes, ears. Red eyes of fiends. Ears of Brimstone the cat, perked to catch the wrong word, even the wrong inflection. Eyes of Angela, blue and trusting, angelic. Ears of



his own, his real private and personal conscience.

They were all riding with him now, riding in the big black limousine, riding with him to his doom. There was the airport, there was the field, there was the plane—a real plane, this time, not the Devil's dream-ship. The plane that took him to Washington, to New York, to the high places of the world which he would drag down to Hell.

Yes, and there were the microphones and the booms and the TV cameras and the trucks. And pop! went the flashbulbs, and the cops held the crowds back, and now he was getting out of the car with Angela and the cat minced on behind...and the FBI man was moving him forward and the network directors were ushering him to the mike and the cameramen were sighting...and somebody was introducing him, saying something about "Hastings" and "GUARDIAN ANGELS," and now, this was it, he was on the air, on camera, he was facing the world.

He stared straight ahead and he opened his mouth and he said:

"This is Paul Hastings. I've come here today to tell the world that it's all a fake."

THERE were noises now, noises all around, and from the crowd murmurs he picked out an angry hissing from between his feet which meant Brimstone was there, spitting in protest.

But Angela was also there, holding his hand, and Hastings continued.

"Yes, let me say it again. I've deceived you. It's a fraud, a hoax. There are no mechanical Consciences to guide you. GUARDIAN ANGELS, INCORPORATED is a myth.

"But you mustn't be disappointed. If I cannot give you what I promised, I can give you something better, something greater. The knowledge that you don't need me!

"No, you don't need an artificial conscience. Nobody does. For each of you has something much more important—a *real* conscience. You cannot buy it, and I implore you not to sell it. Just listen to it, use it, act according to its dictates. If each of you does that, then the world will be the kind of a place you want it to be. A good place, a place in which to live rather than a place in which to fight and kill and be killed.

"You're puzzled now, and confused. You're wondering, for one thing, what this means." Hastings indicated Angela for the benefit of the television cameras. "Well, she's no fake. She *is* an angel. A real angel. You've seen her fly, and I've men here who have touched her, known her reality. She's as real as the angel that dwells inside all of you, and you must believe in her just as you must believe in yourself!"

"Liar!" It sounded human, but it was—Hastings realized—Brimstone's voice.

"It's true!" Angela stepped for-

ward now. "Every word of it is true. If I could only make you understand somehow, make you believe —" She hesitated, and her fluttering hands fell to the harp-strings about her neck. Suddenly she smiled and took the harp in her hands. Her fingers moved across the strings.

Angela played.

There are no words to describe her playing. It was April Fool's Day, and the crowd at the airport, the millions huddled around their radios and television sets had just been dealt the cruellest April Fool joke of all. But Angela played, and they listened. Angela played and they cried. Angela played—and as heaven's own harmony soared forth, they *believed*.

The world could doubt Hastings, doubt Angela's appearance, doubt the halo and the wings. But the world could not doubt the ear-borne evidence of the heavenly music.

Angela played, and Hastings knew that somehow, he had won. His hand patted his coat-pocket, feeling the straight razor he'd concealed there, concealed against failure. He wouldn't use it now. He'd live. The world would live. That was the promise of the celestial music, soaring in triumph against all evil.

Then the music was blotted out in a black blur of nightmare. Something leaped, something hissed, something clawed, tearing the harpstrings to shreds.

It was Brimstone, ripping at the

harp with frantic, frenzied hate. Angela gasped, but her cry was drowned in the squalling rage of the cat-fiend.

HASTINGS pulled the little black monster away, but it was too late. The strings were gone, the music lost forever. And then Hastings was pulled away himself, pulled away by the FBI agents. Before he quite realized it, he and Angela and the spitting cat were being hustled aboard the waiting plane.

He caught a last glimpse of the confusion and consternation seething through the crowd at the airport—a last glimpse of the bewildered network officials—a last glimpse of the earth and sky—and then the motors were roaring, the door of the little private plane was sealed—and he felt the shaking and shuddering taxi down the long runway.

Hastings looked around. He and Angela were sitting in the rear seat of the small cabin; the two black-hatted FBI men occupied the front seat with Brimstone. The pilot ahead was invisible. The young man glanced through the small cabin window and saw the ground move away, saw New Orleans fade behind the clouds.

"I don't get it," he muttered, to Angela. "We told them it was a fake. Why are we going to Washington, then?"

"Washington?" It was the cat who spoke. "Who said anything

about Washington?"

Hastings goggled. "You're talking!" he warned. "And in front of those FBI men—"

For answer, the two men turned and removed their black hats. Hastings saw twin sets of horns rising from bald brows. They grinned at him, exposing serrated fangs.

"We have our own version of the FBI," Brimstone purred, complacently. "Just a precaution. The Big Guy had a hunch you might somehow try to double-cross him."

"I'm not afraid," said Angela. She patted Hastings' arm. "I'm proud of you, Paul."

"But where are we going?" Hastings murmured.

His voice was scarcely audible above the roar of the engine. The plane dipped alarmingly, and the engine-roar became a tortured scream. Air whined past them. The plane began to spiral, and to nose down, down—

"We're crashing!"

Paul Hastings held the angel in his arms. Somewhere Brimstone was laughing like the fiend he was, somewhere the air and earth were torn with the impact of explosion, somewhere flames rose to receive them in a fiery embrace—then all of it ended in blackness.

**B**lackness. Blackness and flames. That's all Hastings saw when, after a long moment, he opened his eyes. Gradually he managed to differentiate between the

two. The blackness was omnipresent, eternal. The flames rose out of it, cleaving the darkness again and again without dispelling it. They came from the bottom of the blackness, from lakes and pools and oceans of fire.

Hastings felt searing heat. He breathed it, inhaled the acrid odor. And then his hearing returned, but it was scarcely a welcome addition to his senses. Because he heard the screams. The ageless, endless screams.

Quickly he sat up, realizing automatically that he was unhurt, but not caring — for his first thought was of Angela.

Angela wasn't screaming. She sat beside him on the rocky ledge. Beyond her stood the two pseudo-FBI men, and Brimstone. There was no plane, nor any wreckage of a plane in sight. Only the blackness beyond, with the flames rising up in rhythm with the screams.

Hastings didn't say, "Where are we?" He knew. He *knew*, long before the cat minced forward over the glowing ashes and purred,

"Welcome home, brother!"

The young man rose, helping Angela to her feet. "So it was a fake crash, too," he commented. "Just staged to fool the world and account for our disappearance."

"Right," acknowledged the cat. "You aren't really dead, and of course, she can't be killed. But I have a feeling you'll soon wish you were dead. I've never seen the Big

Dealer quite so hot—if you know what I mean.”

“All right, let’s get going,” said one of the members of the Fiendish Bureau of Investigation.

There was no question of refusing. Hastings and Angela picked their way over the rocks, hand in hand. The nearness of Angela gave him a comforting feeling. With his free hand he patted the razor, but its presence brought no relief. What good is a razor in Hell?

“You won’t need a shave here, brother,” remarked the cat. With a start, Hastings realized that Brimstone could still read his mind whenever there were no outward noises to interfere.

Shortly, however, the noises began. They constituted a racket; literally an infernal racket.

Dante Alighieri, who claimed to have paid a visit to Hell during the early years of the fourteenth century, left a very definitive account of the shrieks of the damned, the moans and outcries of lost souls, the cacaphony of fiends. John Milton, a later commentator who whitewashed Satan under the guise of Lucifer, paid his respects to the pitfalls of the Pit. Jonathan Edwards made his additions to the edition of perdition, and a host of lesser luminaries did their best — or worst — to describe the infamy of the Inferno.

**B**UT there are no words to describe the utter reality, or the

uttered reality of the shrieks; no words to describe the intensity of fear and fright which rose from the darkness in a form as tangible as the odor of sulphur and brimstone.

It was, Hastings decided quite simply, a Hell of a place.

Not that he had much time for either observation or decision. The fiends were leading him a far from merry chase—stumbling over rocks, leaping over fissures filled with live steam, bypassing streams of molten lava, circling around miniature volcanoes.

Angela clung to him, wings throbbing with alarm; yet her smile and her halo glowed as brightly as ever. For some reason she still retained the battered, stringless harp — but whether it gave her any more comfort than the razor did Hastings he could not say.

Brimstone frisked along happily, obviously pleased at his homecoming. The way became torturous and they threaded through murky tunnels, passing through larger chasms and caverns where even the voices of the damned and the doomed were drowned out by the roar of flames.

“Don’t hesitate,” Brimstone smirked. “The flames can’t hurt you as long as you’re alive.” The cat began to sing *Chloe* in an offkey wail. Then it switched to *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* with equally dismal results.

They entered a long slanting tunnel that suddenly spiralled and wound down interminably. Hastings

and Angela slipped and floundered until the two fiends were forced to half-support them in their progress. Finally, they emerged.

Finally, they emerged into the great vaulted cavern circled by a rim of fire. The two fiends melted unobtrusively into the shadows, leaving them in the dubious custody of Brimstone. They stood there, dwarfed under the domed igneous arena, and stared at the whirling ball of flame in the center of the cavern. The whirling ceased and disappeared.

The Devil stood before them.

"So," he observed, calmly. "Where angels fear to tread, eh?"

"I'm not afraid!" Surprisingly enough, it was Angela who spoke.

"Then you're a fool, like the young man," answered Satan. "And the time has come to pay for your folly."

"It was worth it, to stop your scheme," Angela retorted.

"Was it? I wonder if you'll still believe that after you pay the price."

"What are you going to do to us?" demanded Hastings.

"A fair question. Which demands a properly foul answer." The Devil tugged at his beard in a gesture Hastings had learned to dread. "I must confess that I haven't given the matter sufficient thought, as yet. You see there are a number of delicate legal and theological questions to iron out. By rights, I am not supposed to

have jurisdiction over an angel — even a fallen angel." A reminiscent look crept into the flaming eyes. "A fallen angel," he mused. "I'd almost forgotten the heights from which I myself descended. So much has happened since. So many things. I remember Prosperine, and Orpheus—"

HE shook his head. The beard shed a shower of sparks. "But I cigger. We were speaking of punishment; a subject which I may lay claim to handle with some authority.

"Hastings, you are my property to deal with as I see fit. I'm in no hurry; eternity is my kingdom and your prison. As for the angel, she's beyond the reach of any aid, mortal or immortal."

Brimstone purred his way into the presence, arching his back and rubbing his tail against the cloven hoof of his master.

"Let me have them," he mewed. "I've put up with a lot from these two, and I deserve a chance."

"Perhaps. At least, until I devise a device, I can remand them to your custody." Satan smiled. "Good enough. Take charge of them as you wish."

Hastings and Angela stood irresolute as the cat moved forward, blackly, balefully.

"You'd best obey Brimstone," the Devil advised. "There is no possibility of resistance and no escape. A thousand fiends will rise

as quickly as the flames."

Again, Satan smiled. "Oh, I admit it's all a little old-fashioned," he said. "There are times when I too get sick of fire and brimstone, horns and tails and cloven hooves. But we have our traditions to maintain—and you will find that fear and agony are oldfashioned, too."

He turned tail abruptly with a gesture of dismissal. "We shall meet again," said Satan. "Now, go and be damned."

"This way, please." Brimstone mocked and beckoned to a dark corridor. Without a word, the angel and the mortal followed.

"No sense running away." Brimstone read their thoughts with savage accuracy. "The fiends will find you, soon enough." He purred complacently. "Nothing can stop them, you understand. In all the ages, I know of only one man who stopped them, even for a time."

Hastings stumbled on. He tried not to think of what he was wanting to think. Something the Devil had mentioned, something Brimstone had mentioned now — but the cat would read his mind.

Then Hell itself came to his rescue. The tunnel widened for a moment and turned off so that once again they walked through a large cavern filled with flames — and from the flames rose the deafening cries of the damned.

Brimstone couldn't read minds when there were noises!

"Lag behind," Hastings whispered

to Angela. "Lag behind until I call you." Angela shot him a mystified glance, but obeyed. As the cat led Hastings into still another maze of subterranea, Angela imperceptibly lingered at the entrance. Hastings went on ahead, into the darkness, into the howling and shrieking Inferno.

WHAT thoughts went through her angelic head will never be known. The moments were eternities of exquisite agony; the waiting was an eon of painful, anguished anticipation.

And then Hastings emerged, running, from the tunnel ahead. Without a word he grasped the harp from about her neck, and ran back to the tunnel. The ravaged instrument with its shredded strings disappeared into the blackness.

Again Angela waited. Again the agonized ages passed. The flames shot higher, the howling rose to crescendo, and Hell's own fury rose in infernal majesty to dwarf and mock the white-robed figure of the winged girl.

There was a muted murmuring that grew to a raging roar. Suddenly, from the darkness beyond the flames, Angela saw the rising ring of red eyes, rimming her in on all sides. They were the eyes of fiends, the eyes that brooded in the blackness. Now they crept forward, and from behind them came the evil echo of a titanic tittering. They were crouching, slinking, clos-

er and closer and closer — something had alarmed them, something had alerted them, something had summoned them. Black paws padding, curved claws raking, the dark demons closed in upon their chosen prey.

"Paul!"

Suddenly he was there. Suddenly he emerged from the tunnel and raced to her side. He thrust the harp into her hands. "Play!" he shouted. "Play — it's our only chance! Never mind them, they can't touch us if you play!"

Angela looked down at the re-strung harp, then up into the darkness. Automatically her hands moved over the strings. And the angel played.

The music rose, rose above the rustling, rose above the panting, rose above the roaring of flames and the crying out of the damned.

The music rose and the voices fell, the flames subsided. A new sound took their place — an accompaniment to the celestial music. It was the sound of weeping.

"Come on," Hastings said, leading Angela into a fissured cavity in the rock. "We'll find our way out of here. There *is* a way, you know. If you have faith."

Angela had faith. There was faith in her fingers, faith in the melody they produced, faith in the strength of the soaring strains.

Paul Hastings led her, but he himself was lost — lost in the music. Tears blinded him until he

saw clearly, but what he saw he could never recall.

THEY walked unharmed through the halls of Hell, down corridors of dark despair, through pits of utter degradation, and still Angela played.

Wherever they passed, flames fell back, fiends fawned, and the cries of the doomed became a paen of remembered beauty.

Of Satan, of Brimstone, there were no signs. There was only the walking and the music, the endless wandering through corridor after corridor.

Ages afterwards the way led upward. Through cooler caverns they climbed, and still Angela's harp made melody. The fires faded so that they toiled through darkness, and time itself was melted in the molten music.

And thus it was that they came at last—the man and the angel—to the cavern with the cool stalactites; the cavern that was somehow familiar to Hastings; the cavern where for the first time his skin tingled with recognition of the familiar air of earth.

"Don't look back, Angela," he shouted, above the sound of the strings. "But I think we're safe, now. Out of it!"

But Angela did look back. She looked back, and she screamed. "Look out! The roof is falling in!"

Music—vibration—tremor—whatever it was, the result was the same.

A portion of the pointed rocks over the cavern plunged to earth, to block the entrance of the tunnel from which they had emerged.

Hastings noted it, and at the same time noted their own peril. He threw himself forward, hurling Angela aside. But the rocks came down, and once again Hastings sank into blackness.

“PAUL! Paul!” It was Angela’s voice, and somehow it carried a sweetness greater than the music to his ears.

He opened his eyes. She was shaking him, dragging him from the debris that littered the floor of the cavern.

“Are you all right?”

“I think so.” He stood up, shakily. “Yes, I’m all right. But—what happened to you?”

He stared at Angela. Something *had* happened, but at first he could not comprehend the nature of the change. Then he realized it. The white-robed girl who stood before him, clung to him, and then kissed him was just *that* and nothing more. A white-robed girl, minus halo, harp and wings. And there was nothing angelic about her kiss, however heavenly it might seem.

“They’re gone!” he whispered.

“Yes—did you see them?”

“Who?”

“My visitors. You were knocked out. They came at last to tell me that I was not forgotten, you were not forgotten.”

Paul Hastings nodded, numbly. His head still whirled, whether from the shock of the blow or the shock of Angela’s transformation, or the added shock of her words.

“I’ve got good news, Paul. At least, I think it’s good news,” the girl told him. “Your soul is saved. What you did, speaking the truth and defying the Devil, atoned for the evil. But there was a price to be paid.”

“What price?”

“I forfeited my right to return to heaven. In order to return, I must stay on earth and live through another life, virtuously.”

She gazed up at Hastings. “So now I’m just a girl,” she concluded. “And you’ll have to act as my guardian angel.”

Hastings managed a rock-scarred grin. “I’ll keep you virtuous,” he promised. “But not too virtuous.”

It seemed like a nice tag-line for a clinch, but before they could manage it, a sallow, sour-faced man clambered down through the cavern and approached them.

“Hey, what’s the big idea?” he demanded. “Smooching around hyar in a nightie—reckon you’uns’ll catch your death of cold.”

“Just where are we, anyway?” Hastings demanded.

The sour-faced man squirted tobacco-juice at the rocks. “This here’s Mammoth Cave,” he said.

Hastings shrugged. He and Angela followed their self-appointed guide up towards the entrance, up



towards the world of what passes these days for reality.

"So we start a new life," he observed. "No wings, no halo, no harp."

"About that harp," Angela said. "That was a pretty wild inspiration—having me play music to keep off the damned."

"Not my idea at all," Hastings confessed. "Fellow name of Orpheus thought of it ages ago. Lucky thing the Devil mentioned it and Brimstone reminded me of it again as we passed through. I got to thinking, if I could distract his attention long enough we might have a chance to re-string the harp and escape. And that's just what we did."

"One thing more," Angela ventured.

"Yes?"

"About Brimstone—whatever happened to him?"

Hastings grinned. From his pocket he produced the straight razor.

"I took care of him when we got into the noisy darkness of that tunnel, where he couldn't read my thoughts. That was the end of the cat — and the beginning of your music. After all, where do you think I got the new harp-strings? You may not know it, my dear, but you were playing on poor old Brimstone!"

They emerged from the cave. It was evening. Hell was below, heaven was above. Except, of course, for the little portions of both which they would carry forever in their hearts.

THE END

**FEATURED IN OUR SEPTEMBER  
"FIRST ANNIVERSARY" ISSUE:—**

## **CRY, CHAOS!**

*By Dwight V. Swain*

**A Great New Novel marks the return of one of the most popular Science-Fiction Writers in the past ten years!**

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The September "Anniversary" Issue—On Sale The 1st Week In July



# BEYOND THE ULTRA - VIOLET

*By*

*Frank M. Robinson*

**Experimenting with the eyes can be a very dangerous thing. You can go blind—or maybe you'll see something no man alive was meant to look upon!**



**Y**OU better take your money back, mister. Thanks a lot but—no thanks. I wasn't panhandling, my hat fell off and I was trying to find it on the sidewalk. Thanks again for finding it for me but I think I could have managed. And, no offense, but I can find my way all right without being led.

You're surprised that I'm rather

young, huh? Well, youth isn't a crime and anyways, twenty-four can be either young or old, depending on who you're talking to. But I know what you mean. I'm rather young for being blind, isn't that it? Most blind people you see on the streets are the old ones, the shabby ones with the pleading faces and the hat with the lead pencils in it or maybe

*a tin cup and a violin. Sorry to disappoint you but I guess I'm not the type.*

*Sure, I know—you were only trying to help. You probably think I'm bitter because I can't see your world and all the wonderful things in it. Well, it's a long story but that's not the punch line. I might be bitter but not for the reasons you might think. Up until two weeks ago I could see as well as you. And you couldn't call what happened "losing" my sight. Not exactly.*

*So you're curious. You want to hear the rest of it. And you're sure it's not just out of sympathy. Well, all right. There's a bar in the next block where we can get a booth and a couple of beers.*

*Now look, I don't need to be led! You don't need eyes to find your way to a bar on a hot summer day like this. It's toward the end of the block, just a few steps further . . . Right here. There's a booth in the back where nobody will bother us for a while.*

*Okay, make mine the same and here's half a dollar to pay for them. Don't worry, I've got money enough to keep me in beer and pretzels for a long time. Nobody could accuse the professor of being stingy with the university funds when he paid me off.*

**I**T began about six months ago. I was in my third year at college, studying physics under Professor Martin. Maybe you've seen Martin around the campus—ε. rather thin

guy with a face like the Rock of Gibraltar. One of the few profs who can still sound enthusiastic about their subject after twenty years of teaching it.

The unit we were studying at the time was the one on light and physical optics, primarily a study of the spectrum stretching from x-rays beyond the ultra-violet to the visible spectrum, down to the infra-red and radio waves and the short waves used in television and radar. I had been absent from class a week and on my return the professor invited me to dinner. After the dishes had been cleared away he leaned back in his chair and lit what I took to be his usual after dinner cigar.

"I like to meet my students informally, Charles," he began. "Sorry that your wife couldn't come but I understand she's . . . well . . ." He let the sentence trail off.

I sat there feeling rather sick. It's one of those things you hope everybody has heard about so you don't have to explain, to sit and take their looks of pity and sympathy. Apparently the professor hadn't heard. "I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you knew. Both Alice and the baby died."

The hand he held his cigar in quivered a little. "I'm sorry," he said, and mercifully dropped it there. Then he changed the subject to the one he had in mind when he had asked me to dinner.

"Light, Charles, is such a large subject—and, comparatively speaking, so little is known about it. But

perhaps—perhaps I know more than most. And if you wish, you can too. Would you like to see the world you live in, Charles? Not just the one tenth of one percent that they call the visible spectrum, but all of it, the whole glorious universe of light?"

He took me into his confidence on his favorite research project, an attempt to see wavelengths other than those in the visible spectrum. His enthusiasm was catching and there wasn't much hesitation. I signed the paper releasing the university from all responsibility in case of an "accident." So easy to sign one's life away—though it wasn't actually my life, only my eyesight.

**T**HE treatments began immediately. First, adaptation of vision to a dark room, like those used for flyers during the war. Then the drops of black liquid that the professor had invented, slowly spreading over the eyes, subtly altering the rods and cones of the retina, the nerve endings sensitive to light.

And I began to live in a gradually fading world. Have you ever wondered what it's like to go blind? The increasing dusk and darkness around the edges of your vision, the little errors and mistakes that begin to crop up in everyday life. Your blunder over a stool that you didn't quite see, your snubbing someone on the street whom you didn't recognize in time, the gradual awareness among your friends that something

was wrong with your eyes and their crude attempts to make it "easier" for you.

For to all intents and purposes I was going blind. My "range" of vision remained the same but it was shifting down the scale. The first colors to fade out of my vision were violet and blue and their tints. The sky overhead gradually became colorless, magazine covers began to lose their appeal and slip into a bleak blending of yellows and reds. Then slowly, the other colors began to grow dim and less distinct until finally even red had faded from my sight.

But there were other colors that replaced them. Brilliant, scintillating colors that made seeing an adventure.

Describe them to you? How could you describe "red" and "green" to a person who was blind from birth? How can I describe iridescent and vliosheen to you? Do you think you could understand? Do you think you could "see" what I mean?

Oh, I could still get around in your world. I could still "see" people. All objects radiate heat, even ice. As an object's temperature goes up, the wavelength of the radiation given off goes up to the infra-red, then into the visible. I could tell how hot water was by looking at it. I could see people by the heat they gave off, glowing figures moving down the street and around the lab!

And still my range of vision shifted. Down to short waves and radio waves, the language of international communication, the wave-

lengths that continents and countries speak to each other in. Do you know how beautiful the aerial of your radio is, the different waves running down it like ripples across a pond? Have you ever seen the glorious pool of light around a radio broadcasting station? Have you ever marvelled at the thin, trailing filaments of color tangling in the nest of television antennas that the city carries on its rooftops?

THE professor was worried, for along with losing my sight of this world, I began to lose interest in it. A truly blind man wouldn't for he has nothing to replace vision with, he's still bound to the commonplace globe. He can improve his hearing or his sense of touch, but nothing replaces his sight. It was different with me. I was seeing something far more interesting than the dull, mundane world.

They fixed a cot up for me in the laboratory; an experiment like myself was far too important to risk on the streets. Even then, I'd bump into tables or smash lab apparatus. I suppose an important experiment like I was should have taken care of itself, sort of like a self-lubricating motor. I'd cost the university lots of money and I suppose I should have watched out for their investment—though I was probably the only one who *didn't* care what happened to me.

There finally came a day when my eyes didn't change. I had reached a sticking point. The end of the spec-

trum? The professor said he didn't think so.

I didn't think so either for just beyond my range of vision seemed a hint of something else. I caught "glimpses" of something—I couldn't make out exactly what. There seemed to be vague suggestions of form and color and life, indistinct figures that capered and grimaced just beyond my view. There was nothing definite, nothing that I could draw a picture of and describe like you could an automobile or a building. There were just suggestions, a feeling of something more. There was a hint of life in the masses of winking light that beckoned and burned.

The next day the professor brought my eyes back to normal. Familiar objects had a sudden fascination that quickly faded when I had regained normal vision for an hour or so. It was a prosaic world once again. Radios and aerials were just—cabinets of wood and plastic and glass tubes and strips of rusty wire and metal.

I wasn't sure the experiment was over. I asked the professor if there was anything that would take me further along the scale, beyond, perhaps, even the spectrum as we knew it.

He twisted his hands nervously behind his back and walked over and looked out the laboratory window. "I could do it for you, Charles, but I'm not sure that I could bring you back. Your eyes would be stranded in that world of yours. You could never look at ours again."

He turned from the window and faced me.

"Why don't you forget it for a few weeks and then come back here and if you still want to, we'll continue the experiment."

I agreed and left. I spent the next two weeks doing nothing but looking at our world. Do you think you really appreciate your sight? If you knew you had but a few weeks of sight left, what would you do with it? Visit famous landmarks? See the country? If you thought about it, I think you'd do the same as I did. I began to enjoy what was close at hand, the surroundings I had lived in. Everyday sights held a certain fascination for me. The stark black and white mosaic of a city at the tag end of winter; the sheer, raucous color of the magazines at your local newsstand; the smooth patterns of hues and tints in a department store window display.

And how much do you appreciate springtime? The few weeks of the year when the city loses its look of drabness and little plots of grass and flowers add color to it—like brilliant strips of cloth in a dirty patchwork quilt. Then there were the kids roller skating down the sidewalks, the girls' pigtails flying and the boys' knickers flapping in the breeze. And later on, in the business blocks, the soft glow of neon against the swirling fog of a warm spring night.

That was the last spring I'll ever see. I'll be able to smell the flowers and feel the warmth of the sun and

run my fingers through the green grass. But I'll never see it again.

After the few weeks were up I returned to the professor—still curious about what lay beyond the spectrum limits. There were the eye washes and the drops and then the heavy strips of white cloth wrapped around my head, keeping your world out and bounding mine with a rim of black. My last look at the world was of some kids playing in the city streets, and some bread crumbs spread out on the window sill for the birds. After that a quick view of the lab—a jungle of glass retorts and vats filled with oily chemicals—and a closeup of Professor Martin's gnarled hands holding the bandages for my eyes.

I lay on the cot in the lab for the next few days, listening to your world and feeling it and remembering it; the good and the bad, the adventuresome and the dull. I could hear the newsboy hawking his papers and the shouts of the kids and the clatter of the main street trolley. I could smell the factory smoke and the heavy, animal odor drifting up from the stockyards. I could hear the people in the lab and Professor Martin scurrying about, asking me how I felt, and toward the end, telling me that in a few hours the bandages would come off.

Two weeks ago the professor came into the lab and started tearing at the adhesive, stripping away the layers of white cloth. Even when he had the bandages all the way off, I kept my eyes closed, almost afraid to op-

en them.

My eyes had to focus first. Everything was so damned brilliant and indistinct. Then my sight cleared and suddenly everything was very plain.

\* \* \*

*Well, that's about it. There isn't much more to tell. It hasn't been too boring to listen to me for fifteen minutes, has it? I can tell you haven't been too bored because you haven't touched your beer, have you? It's getting warm—and you know what they say about warm beer . . .*

*What did I see? You really want to know, don't you?*

*Well, I've tried to rationalize it and explain it and I suppose I can,*

*in a dim way. Put it this way: I'm totally blind now. What's bright to you is black to me. But I'm not bitter because I can't see your world. And I can't describe to you what I saw because, you see, I don't remember. Perhaps it's merciful, I don't know. I can only guess from what the professor told me.*

*Professor Martin had stripped the bandages from my eyes and he and a few assistants saw my eyes blur and finally focus on something in a different world from theirs. And then, before I fainted, I screamed the one word that none of them would ever forget.*

*"ALICE!"*

THE END

## The Editorial

(Continued From Page 5)

regular list of contributors again and right back at the top of your list of favorites.

THE cover for next issue incidentally, is a terrific Walter Hinton interplanetary painting. Dwight wrote the story around the cover and believe us, every detail of that cover painting is in the story. With a combination like Hinton and Swain you can look forward to some topnotch entertainment.

FOR a further look into the future, Geoff St. Reynard is putting the final touches to a new novel, the sequel to his now famous THE USURPERS which we ran in FA when we edited the magazine. We've already seen the first draft of the

novel and can truthfully say that the sequel is even better than the original. And you know as well as we do that as a rule sequels are never what they should be. But that's not true in St. Reynard's story. So keep your eyes on this column for the announcement.

YOU'LL also have noted that the Reader's section is much larger this issue. We think this is an improvement too. And it will continue that way unless you tell us to cut it down in size. (Not much chance, we'll bet!) So you've got plenty of room in IMAGINATION to have your say. All you have to do is take advantage of the fact. So get your letters in as soon as you can. And write about anything you want in the science-fiction field.



It's your department.

**W**E have been pleased to note the enthusiasm you have thus far exhibited over our new fan feature, FANDORA'S BOX. As long as you continue to enjoy the column we'll continue to run it. We might add that along with those of you who have written in, we also feel that Mari Wolf has done a creditable job of writing the column. And while we're on that subject for a moment, Mari informs us that she and hubby, Rog Phillips are planning to leave shortly for the Far West. Seems they plan on settling someplace in Arizona or New Mexico. So until Mari has a more permanent address we'd suggest you send all mail and fanzines for FANDORA'S BOX to IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois. When Mari gets settled again we'll give you her new address.

**W**E'D also like to announce at this time that you should try and make a date over the Labor Day Holiday this year. That's the time of the year when fans, editors, artists and writers get together for the big powwow, the World's Science Fiction Convention. It's being held in New Orleans this September, and you should try and make it for the gala festivities. There'll be forums, banquets, balls, and all the things that go into making a Convention a big success. We won't give the details now because you might forget them. But you'll find all the information you'll need in coming issues.

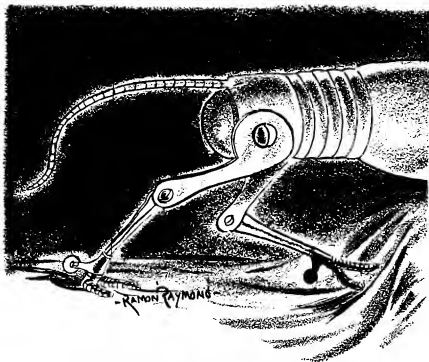
**A**LSO we've received a great many letters from Service Men throughout the world, asking for copies of science-fiction magazines.

We send as many copies as we can secure, but we're sure many G.I's aren't able to get science-fiction where they're stationed and perhaps don't know who to write to. We'd like to suggest that you send copies you have read to some friend of yours in the Service. He'll be glad to pass the magazines along to others.

**I**NCIDENTALLY what's ever happened to the Flying Saucers? Reports have been very few and scattered these past months. Have they been recalled to the main Space Fleet after their reconnaissance? No, we haven't had one too many. Anybody got a better explanation? At any rate, that will give you a hint as to the subject of a new cover story we just got in the house. We won't tell you who wrote it or what the title is at this time. But we will say it is one of the best *logical* treatments of the subject we've ever seen. And talk about Fifth Column activities! After reading the story we began to wonder just how much we do know about our Earth today! But more about that next issue. See you then . . . W L H



"Look dear, it's raining again."



**If the devil had been searching for a playmate,  
this thing Craig had created would have been the**

# PERFECT COMPANION

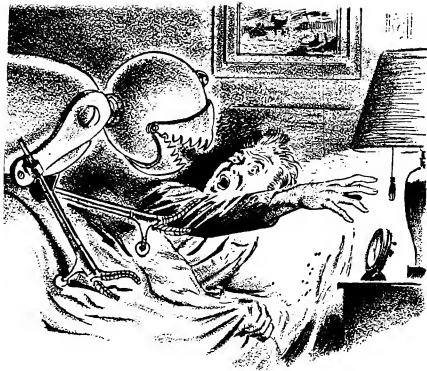
*By John McGreevey*

**T**HE thing was not large. About the size of a large dog. It lay on its metallic side on the operating table, and it was alive. In its own way, it lived . . . because Craig Stevens had given it life.

Now, Craig stroked that metallic

surface and smiled. "Very well, Sheila," he said pleasantly. "Get out. Get out and never come back. I'm not keeping you."

The woman who stood across the table from him uttered a choked, strangled noise that could have been anger or sorrow. "I hate you.



I never thought that I could hate anyone, but you've taught me in these last three years, Craig. You've taught me."

The other nodded and picked up a small battery from the table. "I'm glad that our three years together haven't been a total loss, my dear."

Sheila dabbed at her eyes. "You don't even give me the satisfaction of seeing you lose your temper. I wanted you to be uncomfortable and embarrassed. I wanted to see you suffer as you've made me suffer."

"And so you tell me you're leav-

ing me. Hardly the proper stimulus to cause me to suffer, Sheila. A celebration would be more in order." His grey eyes regarded her with the cold objectivity of a lab technician observing the death agonies of a new species of insect.

Impulsively, she moved around the table to him. "Craig," she began, and there was a note of entreaty in her voice, "what's happened to us?"

"Mental cruelty is the complaint you lodged, I believe." He didn't look at her now, but focused his

attention instead upon the mechanism on the table. "Ridiculous phrase. The only real cruelty is mental of course. Physical suffering soon passes, but suffering in the mind, that endures."

She stared with loathing down at the thing on the table. "And now this . . . this monster that you've made . . . I suppose you mean for it to replace me in your life?"

Craig Stevens chuckled, "Nothing could take your place, Sheila. I shall always remember you as a most individual subject."

Suddenly, she threw her arms around his neck and pulled herself to him. "Listen to me, Craig," she begged. "You've got to listen. I can't leave you like this. I need you. You need me. Let's try again. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe you haven't meant to hurt me."

Carefully, he disentangled himself and pushed her gently away. "Your luggage is packed, Sheila. You've made up your mind, and this is one time you're not going to be allowed to change it. I don't need you. I don't need anyone."

Her body shook with sobbing. "You loved me once."

HE laughed, and the sound echoed from the cold stone walls of the laboratory. "Love!" The laughter mounted. "What a foolish notion, Sheila. You interested me once. You had spirit, and I was impelled to discover how much it would take to break that spirit."

The sobs stopped. She paused, then looked up at him. He was smiling, his thin lips twisted, the grey eyes glistening. She stared at him for a long moment.

"You're wishing you could hurt me, aren't you, Sheila? You're wishing you could strike out at me . . . hear me cry in pain. That's why you bore me. You're so transparent. I can read your every thought . . . anticipate your every emotion and they're all dull." He touched the thing on the table again. "That's why I've perfected Ohm here. He'll be the perfect companion."

Sheila looked at the contraption he touched, and a shudder of revulsion shook her. Once it had been only a few scraps of steel, a photoelectric eye, a couple of batteries, some condensers and relays. Now it was "alive" and Craig had given it a name: Ohm.

She looked from the created to the creator. "I should have known this was the way it would end, and I can believe you when you say you've never loved me. You can't love anyone. You're incapable of love, Craig. Other men work for the happiness of those near to them, but you are only intrigued by pain and suffering. If it's any satisfaction to you, your experiment with me has been very successful."

Craig bowed slightly.

She moved toward the laboratory door. "It always works out for you, doesn't it, Craig? You always get

bored first. You're always the one who smiles and tells someone else to get out." She stopped in the doorway. "Some day, perhaps you'll be the one to go; you'll be the one who has become transparent and uninteresting."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I can only hope that when that day arrives I'll be able to resign myself as graciously as you have."

For a second, she hesitated and then very quietly she said: "I loved you once, Craig. When we were married, I loved you very much. I could still love you, if . . . if you could find it in your heart to be human. But until you can, I guess Ohm is the companion you should have. Goodbye."

"A very eloquent speech, my dear. Goodbye and good luck."

With a final quick glance at the thing on the table, Sheila stepped through the laboratory door and out of Craig Stevens' life.

He sighed as he heard the outside door slam behind her. She had been a fascinating experiment. Little by little, he had tested her, discovered those irritants which were best calculated to make her react. Broken dinner engagements, forgotten birthdays, public insults, lies, deceptions, intrigues — each had played its part in her final nervous disintegration. But toward the end, the game had proved boring.

So, he had devised Ohm, and now he was left in solitude to explore the infinite possibilities rep-

resented by his electric pet.

Light was Ohm's food. He craved it as humans crave food, drink, companionship. Craig had built a special home for his creature — a brilliantly lighted hutch where it could creep to recharge the batteries which gave it movement and power.

LOOKING down at his pet, Craig felt a sudden, overwhelming sense of possession. Ohm was perfect. His shiny steel shell glistened in the bright laboratory light. Under that shell were three wheels and two battery-powered motors — one for creeping and one for steering. A delicate brain and nervous system fashioned of condensers and relays would motivate Ohm.

Craig was surprised to note that his hands were trembling slightly as he made the final connections. The scene with Sheila had perhaps made more of an impression than he had thought; and then, too, this was his big moment . . . the moment toward which he had worked for months.

Connections completed, he struggled to lift Ohm to the floor. Though Ohm was relatively small—he stood just hip-high and was perhaps three-and-a-half feet long—he was surprisingly heavy.

Craig Stevens stepped back and waited. If his calculations were correct, Ohm would now begin his search for light. He would move about the lab . . . guided by his

photo-electric eye . . . seeking the gratification which only strong light could give.

Absolute silence held the laboratory. Had he been wrong? Had he miscalculated? He stared at the unmoving creature. He willed it to move. He would not be defied by this mass of steel and wire. Move, he commanded it. Move!

Slowly, with a slight jerking motion, Ohm began to move forward. Like an animal that has been sleeping and is still groggy with dreams, it moved—hesitated—then moved again.

Craig Stevens sighed with satisfaction. His calculations had been correct. Ohm lived. The creature was moving more rapidly now across the room. As it gained momentum, it was confronted suddenly with a lab table. With a painful little thump, it collided with the table leg. Then, there was a faintly ominous growling noise, and Ohm backed away and set out in another direction.

Fascinated, Craig followed the creature from room to room. When Ohm discovered a patch of bright light, he would pause and bask momentarily in its brilliance. His contentment and deep satisfaction were apparent.

At last, by a process of trial and error, Ohm came to the hutch that Craig had built. Eagerly, he pushed his way to the door and quickly glided in. After satisfying himself

that Ohm was comfortably installed, Craig dropped the wire grating over the hutch. His new pet was at home.

The next few weeks were busy ones for Craig and Ohm. Countless experiments were tried, and in every case, the robot was a model subject. His potentials seemed unlimited.

Craig was asked to give a special lecture and demonstration at the University, and his audience of scholars and research experts were delighted with Ohm.

"The perfect companion," Craig laughingly called him. "So understanding. If any of you gentlemen are tiring of your wives and their demands, I'll be very pleased to duplicate Ohm for you."

Ohm wandered about Craig's apartment at will. Occasional guests who dropped in to visit soon accustomed themselves to the sight of the metal creature lumbering through the room, bumping into chairs and tables, growling faintly and changing its course.

SOME weeks after Ohm was first animated, Craig conceived the idea of giving him a more definite personality. After a few hours spent in sketching, and some hurried consultations with a metalsmith, Ohm was equipped with a head.

Now his presence was even more disturbing than before. Craig had placed the photo-electric eye direct-

ly in the middle of the high steel forehead. A nose was simulated, and, last of all, a hinged jaw, with twin rows of razor sharp fangs.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Professor Harvey Beale, Craig's oldest associate, "why did you have to turn Ohm into such a grinning monster? I think I preferred him as a blank nonentity."

Craig laughed. "He is ferocious looking, isn't he? I devised that head to scare away peddlers and tramps. Now, when the doorbell rings and I don't want to be disturbed, I just let Ohm face them down!"

Professor Beale joined in Craig's laughter, but there was a note of constraint in his voice. "You feel that you have perfect control over Ohm?"

"Complete." Craig looked across the room where the robot basked in a puddle of yellow lamplight. "It's a wonderful feeling, Beale . . . a feeling that you can never experience with a human being . . . or even a cat or a dog."

With a little grunt, Ohm began moving toward the chair in which Craig sat. The single eye glistened in the leering face and the small wheels made a singing noise as he spun across the carpet.

Professor Beale followed the movement with some little apprehension. "What's such a wonderful feeling?"

Craig gestured to Ohm. "This sense of possession . . . of control.

It's a thing we all want . . . every human being . . . from the time we're old enough to clutch our first pet until we drop into our graves. We seek it in marriage . . . in our children . . . but we're always cheated, Beale. Always cheated because there's an unpredictable element. But with Ohm," he dropped his hand over the side of his easy chair and patted the metal head, "with Ohm, there's no doubt. No question. He's mine . . . and no matter how sorely I try him, I can always predict his reactions."

Professor Beale nodded slowly. "I suppose. How . . . how sorely have you tried him, Craig?"

"I haven't really put him to the test as yet. But now that the preliminaries are out of the way, I mean to begin. I'm going to thwart him, Beale. I'm going to frustrate him in every way. I'm going to deprive him of the thing he desires most . . . light . . . and observe his reactions."

A flicker of apprehension touched Beale's long, friendly face. "These experiments . . . you'll do them at the school lab?"

Craig Stevens stood up. "No. Here. Ohm is adjusted to this atmosphere. He knows these rooms. His reactions will be truer if I don't move him."

"And just what do you hope to prove?"

STEVENS stared down at the thing he had created. The photo-

electric eye seemed to wink up at him. "The human brain has something like ten billion nerve cells, Beale. Ohm has the equivalent of only two, and yet, you'll admit, he gives a lifelike performance. By studying Ohm's frustrations and reactions, we'll be able to draw some very valuable conclusions regarding human nervous disorders and breakdowns."

The other man nodded absently. "I wish," he said finally, "that you'd transfer your experiments to the school lab, Craig. I think it would be safer."

"Safer!" Craig laughed a little too loudly. "No, Beale. I started this in my own way, and that's how I mean to finish it. I'm perfectly safe here. Ohm won't let anything harm me. Will you, Ohm?"

It was coincidence, of course, but at that moment, Ohm turned and scuttled over to Craig's side.

He began the breaking-down process slowly. When Ohm settled himself in a particularly warm puddle of light, Craig would snap it off. Patiently, the robot would begin its search for another pool.

Then Craig moved the hutch, and watched with academic amusement the creature's wild and frantic efforts to locate its home—the source of its life-giving food. Ohm groped in the corner where the hutch had always stood, and pathetic little whirring and buzzing noises came from his open jaws. Again and again he returned to the corner, painstakingly

exploring every inch of it, his movements more and more jerky and disconnected.

At last, when it seemed that the creature might destroy itself in its frustration, Craig restored the hutch to its accustomed place. Ohm scuttled in and huddled in a far corner. For a great many hours, the robot refused to venture again from its shelter.

Next, Craig tried an even more agonizing experiment. He left the hutch in its usual spot, but he dropped over its entrance a mesh of fine wire, which permitted the light to filter through but prevented Ohm's entry.

He released Ohm in the room and settled himself to watch the results. After a number of exploratory trips, the robot seemed to feel the need of refreshment, and accordingly began its slow, bumping progress toward the hutch. Excited by the bright light which filtered through the mesh, Ohm accelerated his pace as he approached the haven, and crashed with painful violence against the barrier. The recoil sent him spinning several yards away.

The quiet room was filled with the sound of Craig Stevens' delighted laughter and the faint little grunting sounds of the robot. Again, Ohm tried an entry, and again, he failed. The next approach was more cautious, but the results were the same. He seemed maddened by the presence of the bright light which he



so deeply craved and which had become suddenly inaccessible to him.

Again and again he flung his steel body against the wire mesh in a mounting frenzy of desire.

Never had Craig Stevens witnessed a spectacle so excruciatingly amusing and revealing. It was as pathetic and priceless as Sheila's foredoomed desire to beget a child.

Finally, as the battery which powered him was depleted, Ohm subsided, his steel muzzle touching the mesh which separated him from the life-giving light he had sought.

**R**EMEMBERING the robot's bewildered struggles as he recorded them in his notes, Craig was shaken from a fresh paroxysm of laughter. He wished now that films had been taken of the experiment, for certainly it had proved most revealing. Of course, it would be repeated. There would be other opportunities.

And there were, for Craig tried that particular experiment many times. Not that he needed additional data for his report. He added scarcely one new observation after that first trial. It was more that the robot's agony of frustration seemed to satisfy some deep craving . . . a desire as insatiable as Ohm's for the light. Craig could not explain this fascination, in fact, he did not attempt to explain it. Such an explanation might have proved dou-

bly disturbing.

Craig seldom went out. More and more, he gave himself over to the delights of mistreating Ohm. He found that he no longer felt any need for human associations. He and the robot were a complete little world in themselves. The creator and the created. The torturer and the tortured.

One evening, Professor Beale did drop in, and before he could stop himself, commented on Craig's appearance: "You're not well, Craig," he said. "You've lost weight. Are you sure you're not carrying a fever now?"

Craig fought down the unreasoning resentment he felt for Beale. He had planned a new variant to test Ohm that night, and now Beale's visit had cheated him. "Never been better," he countered. "I've been working hard."

"With the robot?" Beale's eyes roamed the room, seeking for the steel-encased body, the glistening cyclops-eye.

"Naturally. And believe me, Beale, my report is going to create a sensation. Every neurologist and physiologist in the world will be taking lessons from me." His voice had gotten progressively shriller, and he paced nervously up and down as he spoke.

Beale shifted uncomfortably. "You're working too hard, Craig. Take some time off. Forget Ohm for a while. Enjoy yourself."

Craig spun on him: "Enjoy my-

self! Do you think there's any other place in the world where I could find the excitement that I know right here? Forget Ohm! I can't forget him. He's wonderful, Beale! Sensational!"

"Of course, of course." Beale was feeling more and more alarmed by Stevens' manner. "I saw Sheila the other day," he ventured, seeking for something to take the conversation away from Ohm. "She asked about you."

Craig's laugh was choked and half-hysterical. "Sheila! I'd completely forgotten her. Has she found herself a nice dull nobody?"

"I think she's still in love with you, Craig."

Craig's giggle climbed the scale. "In love! You talk like a fool, Beale. Love! What childishness, when there are other emotions so much more real and gratifying."

**H**ARVEY Beale stared at the man across the room. Was this the same Craig Stevens with whom he had worked so many hours in the laboratory? Was this semi-hysterical man, the great scientist who had served so brilliantly in the last war? What had happened? What was happening?

A sudden groaning noise at his side turned him abruptly. It was Ohm. And there was a subtle change there, too. The movement was no longer clean and mechanical. It had developed an individuality. When the robot moved, it reminded Beale

of a whipped yellow cur which cringes at the sound of a human voice. Both Stevens and his companion were changed.

"Let's get away for a week," Beale said, and rose . . . stepping quickly away from Ohm. "You'll come back to all this with a new perspective."

Craig shook his head. "Couldn't leave now. Couldn't leave Ohm. Later, maybe."

Why doesn't the fool leave, he thought. Can't he see I've work to do? Can't he sense that I'm anxious to get on with the experiments?

Reluctantly, Beale moved toward the door. "I wish you'd give yourself some rest," he said. "You're pushing yourself too hard."

"I'll be finished soon," Craig said. "Then I can rest. Then I can rest for a long time."

Beale paused in the doorway and looked back. The robot crouched in a corner of the room, its photo-electric eye twitching nervously. That room was full of anticipation. They were waiting for Beale to go—the two of them. Abruptly, he turned and fled.

"Now," said Craig, as Beale's footfalls died away, "now, Ohm, we can get on with our work."

Days passed and the fascination increased. It absorbed and obsessed Craig. His every waking hour was filled with new plans, new variants. At night, when he sank at last into an exhausted sleep, he dreamed of

Ohm and the blind frenzies of frustration to which he was yet to be driven.

Craig saw no one. Ohm was his entire life. A little child who came to his door looking for a lost kitten, fled sobbing, when in a fit of irritation, he threatened her with the robot.

Nothing else mattered; nothing but Ohm. He made little changes in the robot's construction. Supplied him with springs that permitted a graceful, bounding movement; increased the flexibility of the jaws and the razor sharp metal teeth. He was puzzled by a peculiar stain that seemed to have discolored Ohm's teeth. Since no food passed the robot's lips, Craig could not account for the presence of the stains.

On that night, the torment had been prolonged, and once, during it, Ohm seemed to sense Craig's presence and moved toward him with a peculiar half-pleading, half-threatening motion. Excitedly, Craig recorded the deviation. It seemed to mark some sort of turning point in Ohm's development.

When the robot succumbed at last to exhaustion, Craig permitted him to enter the hutch, and leaving him there, proceeded to prepare himself for bed. The sessions with Ohm were leaving him more and more worn out and frazzled. Perhaps Beale had been right. A few days' rest would restore his perspective. Of course he would miss Ohm. Never had he experienced so

gratifying a relationship. It was much more complete than his domination of his mother had been or his subjection of Sheila. It left him feeling at once weak and god-like.

His toilet completed, he went back to Ohm's hutch to put down the wire mesh for the night. Once or twice, he had forgotten it, and the robot's collisions had awakened him early in the morning. As tired as he was, he wanted now to forestall any such disturbance.

OHM was not in his hutch. That was an unlooked-for development. Usually after the experiments, he was so depleted he did not stir from the hutch for hours. And yet now he was gone.

Half-heartedly, Craig looked for him, but he was overcome suddenly with a terrible drowsiness. After all, did it matter whether Ohm spent the night in the hutch? He'd huddle in some corner of the apartment till morning.

Wearily, Craig snapped off all the lights and stumbled into his bedroom. The bedlamp burned brightly in the darkness. He sank down onto the bed. He couldn't remember ever having been so tired. He closed his eyes. Bright red circles spun and whirled. Sleep. He must have sleep.

He was dreaming. The little girl, whose kitten had disappeared was pointing an accusing finger at him. He was trying to explain that he hadn't taken her kitten. And then,

Sheila was there, and she had a great urgency in her manner. She was warning him. Stains. The stains that he had noticed. Didn't he see?

No. He didn't see. His mind spun and whirled. Sounds were a tortured mixture of Sheila's voice, the little girl's sobs, and the faint mechanical grunts which Ohm made.

And then, the laboratory collapsed. The walls caved in to the center and the roof dropped down on top of him. It was a terrible pressure on his chest—crushing it. He had to remove that pressure—had to push that crushing weight away—had to get free.

But he was awake. And it wasn't the roof on his chest. It was Ohm . . . Ohm crouched on top of him . . . the beady photo-electric eye focused on the lamp which burned like a beacon in the otherwise total dark. And then Craig remem-

bered. He hadn't caged Ohm in for the night. He had been loose in the apartment. Naturally, he had come to the only light, and now, he crouched on Craig's chest.

He tried to move, but the robot only flattened itself more—a dead weight. The heavy steel jaws poised over Craig's throat, the steel teeth glittering in the light.

"Ohm!" That single word was a prayer, a plea, a sob.

The stains on the teeth . . . the missing kitten . . . those razor sharp teeth. A strange purring noise filled the room . . . caused the bed to vibrate under him. The steel jaws clicked open.

"I didn't mean it. You don't understand!"

The photo-electric eye blazed wildly as the razor sharp fangs touched his throat . . .

## THE END

### WATCH FOR:—

### **HOLD BACK TOMORROW**

*by KRIS NEVILLE*

★ ★ ★

### **THE OLD WAY**

*by MILTON LESSER*

★ ★ ★

Only the best science-fiction stories appear in **IMAGINATION**. Be sure and reserve your copy of the great September issue at your newsdealer now. On sale the first week in July . . .

# Telepathic Link

WHERE you'd least be likely to look for demonstrations of telepathic relations, is in the staid, sober halls of the United Nations! But surprisingly, it is here that we find an amazingly strong—if strange—bit of evidence to support telepathic thought transference. This is speculation of course, but when you consider it closely, the speculation attitude seems to dwindle.

The United Nations uses a system of interpreters, who, listening to a speaker on the floor through a microphone system, translate the language he is speaking to another, almost as fast as he talks, never more than a word or phrase behind, and as idiomatically perfect as the original tongue. The gift of these high-speed translators is inherent and neither requires or defies analysis. It is simply one of those "things." Thus one translator listens to the Chinese or Russian delegate, and as the speaker's words pour in his ears, he talks into a microphone before him, but speaking English or French. The bridge from Russian to French or English is the translator's head.

All of this is straight-forward and not particularly startling. But some of the translators *anticipate* the speaker, sometimes being words or phrases ahead of him! This is easy to understand if you're considering only a simple sentence starting with say the word "it." Automatically the translator expects the next word to be "is," or "was," or "has" or the like and consequently from the con-

text of what the speaker is saying at that time, he can pretty well deduce what the next word or two may be. But some translators go farther than that! They maintain that they think there is what might be called a "telepathic link", a sympathetic relationship momentarily between the minds!

This can't be proved or disproved. It is too subjective a thing. But it offers another pillar in support of the telepathists' theses that thought-transference is not only possible—it *is*.

The subject has been discussed pro and con, for quite some time and though it hasn't developed into another full-fledged "Dr. Rhine" development, it is a highly significant affair worthy of further analysis. After all why shouldn't there be such a telepathic connection? There is no distance here to speak of, and telepathic phenomena have been verified over enormous distances.

And this is the clincher. It has been noticed generally, that translators are extremely sensitive, intelligent, nervous people, susceptible to all sorts of delicate inferences—ideal types, in a word, to be telepaths. This fact coupled with their own testimony tends to indicate that confirmation of telepathy will come from sources where, ordinarily, you'd least expect it. It would be interesting to see the telepathic effect between a Martian and a Terran interpreter, where telepathy would certainly have to play a greater role!

\* \* \*

# THE MARTIANS AND THE COYS

*By Mack Reynolds*

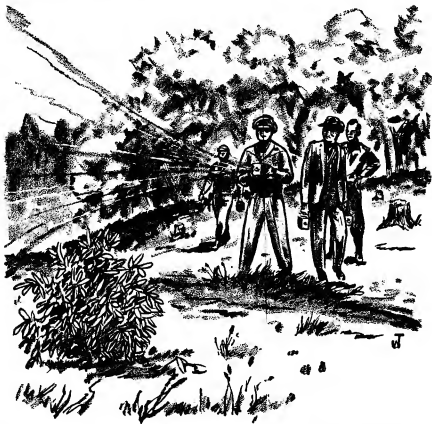


**Lem didn't like guarding the still while Paw and the boys went feuding. He wanted to get a shot at some Martins too! Yup, he sure did . . .**

**M**AW Coy climbed the fence down at the end of the south pasture and started up the side of the creek, carrying her bundle over her shoulder and puffing slightly at her exertion.

She forded the creek there at the

place where Hank's old coon dog Jigger was killed by the boar three years ago come next hunting season. Jumping from rock to rock across the creek made her puff even harder; Maw Coy wasn't as young as she orce was.



**Lem held his rifle ready as the stranger pointed the funny box at him . . .**

On the other side she rested a minute to light up her pipe and to look carefully about before heading up the draw. She didn't really expect to see any Martins around here, but you never knew. Besides, there might've been a revenue agent. They were getting mighty thick and mighty uppity these days. You'd think the government'd have more to do than bother honest folks trying to make an honest living.

The pipe lit, Maw swung the bundle back over her shoulder and started up the draw. Paw and the boys, she reckoned were probably hungry as a passel of hound dogs by now. She'd have to hurry.

When she entered the far side of the clearing, she couldn't see any signs of them so she yelled, "You Paw! You Hank and Zeke!" Maw Coy liked to give the men folks warning before she came up on the still. Hank, in particular, was mighty quick on the trigger sometimes.

But there wasn't any answer. She trudged across the clearing to where the still was hidden in a cluster of pines. Nobody was there but Lem.

She let the bundle down and glowered at him. "Lem, you no-account, why didn't you answer me when I hollered?"

He grinned at her vacuously, not bothering to get up from where he sat whittling, his back to an old oak. "Huh?" he said. A thin trickle of brown ran down from the side of his mouth and through the stub-

ble on his chin.

"I said, how come you didn't answer when I hollered?"

He said, "You called Paw and Hank and Zeke, you didn't holler for me. What you got there, Maw, huh?" His watery eyes were fixed on the bundle.

Maw Coy sighed deeply and sat down on a tree stump. "Now what you think I got there, Lem? I been a bringing your vittles to you every day since Paw and you boys started up this new still. Where's Paw and Zeke and Hank?"

Lem scratched himself with the stick he'd been whittling on. "They went off scoutin' around for the revenooers or maybe the Martins." He let his mouth fall open and peered wistfully into the woods. He added, "I wish I could shoot me a Martin, Maw. I wish I could. I sure wish I could shoot me a Martin."

The idea excited him. He brought his hulking body to its feet and went over to pick up an ancient shotgun from where it leaned against a mash barrel.

Maw Coy was taking corn pone, some cold fried salt pork, and a quart of black-strap molasses from her bundle and arranging it on the top of an empty keg. "You mind yourself with that gun now, Lēm. Mind how you shot up your foot that time."

Lem didn't hear her, he was stroking the stock of the shotgun ab-



sently. "I could do it easy," he muttered. "I could shoot me a Martin easy. I sure could Maw. I'd show Hank and Zeke, I would."

"You forget about the Martins, son," Maw Coy said softly. "Yore my simple son—there's at least one in every family, mostly more—and it ain't fittin' that you get into fights. You got a strong back, strongest in the hills, but yore too simple, Lem."

"I ain't as simple as Jim Martin, Maw," Lem protested.

"Son, they don't come no more simple than you," his mother told him gently. "And mind that gun. You know how you bent the barrel of Zeke's Winchester back double that time, absent-minded like."

He stroked the gun stock, patted it, half in anger, half in protest. His lower lip hung down in a pout. "You stop talkin' thataway, Maw," he growled, "or I'll larrup you one."

Maw Coy didn't answer. She reckoned she'd better set off into the woods and see if she could locate the rest of the men folks, so they could eat.

Lem said under his breath, "I could shoot me a Martin real easy, I could."

\* \* \*

**T**O the Most High, the Glorious,  
the Omnipotent, Omnipresent,  
and Omniscient, the Lord of the  
Seven, the Leader of the Chosen,  
Neo Geek XXXVIII:

In regard to: *Testing of special weapons designed to eliminate present population of the third planet with the eventual view of colonizing.*

From: *Seegel Wan, Commander of Spacecruiser 12B44.*

*Your Omnipotence:*

Upon the receipt of your orders, we proceeded to the planet in question (known to its inhabitants as Earth, or Terra) first touching at its satellite (Luna) in order to pick up the observation group which has been studying the potential foe for several decals.

Commander of the observation group, Baren Darl, has enjoyed the reputation of being our most outstanding authority on Earthlings. It has been principally through his recommendations that the secret, supplementary weapons, worked upon for the past decal, were devised. Baren Darl has successfully deciphered the principal language of Earth and through listening to their radio emanations has compiled a formidable work on his findings. But of his abilities, more later.

It might be added here that Baren Darl and all his group were more than ready to proceed to Earth and begin the slaughter of its inhabitants. It seems that these investigators have for decals listened most carefully to every radio emanation possible to pick up. This has evidently led them to the edge of complete frenzy—especially those who have been assigned the morning pro-

grams, sometimes known as "soap operas" by the Earthlings.

Baren Darl inspected the newly created weapons with considerable care and proclaimed them excellent for our purposes. In particular he was impressed with the I.Q. Depressor; the deadly poison, *nark*; and the lepbonic plague carrying fleas. He was convinced that these secret weapons would give our forces that advantage we seek before launching our all out attack upon Earth.

Acting on Darl's suggestions, we avoided the more heavily populated areas of Earth and landed our Spacecruiser in a mountainous area of the planet known as Kentucky, a sub-division of the United States of America, one of the more advanced Earth nations.

Our plans did not work out exactly as expected.

**K**EEPING well in mind the need for secrecy, we made every attempt to land the Spacecruiser without detection. We settled in a small valley near a stream and immediately sent out scouts to determine if there was any sign that our craft had been sighted in descent.

Evidently, the population of the vicinity was so small that our plans were successful. Our patrols reported only one small group of Earthlings in the immediate area.

Deciding to test the new weapons on this gathering, we disembarked a force of a dozen warriors, all dis-

guised as Earthlings and with myself as commander and Baren Darl as our technical advisor.

"We must keep our senses alert for Sam Spade, Superman and the Lone Ranger," Baren Darl said nervously, peering around among the strange exotic trees and other vegetation that grows on Earth.

I was somewhat surprised at his tone and obvious unease.

"Who?" I asked. "What?"

"Three Terran warriors of amazing ability and viciousness," he told me. "I have been gathering reports of their activities from the radio for some time. They seem to have clairvoyant minds; one or the other of them almost invariably appears on the scene of violence."

I said impatiently, "Without doubt, our weapons would mean the end of these warriors."

I did not share his belief that any Earthling warriors might be our equals or superiors, but to remain on the cautious side, I immediately ordered that the Elect-no be switched on. This weapon, one of the several designed for the Earth campaign, as your Omnipotence is undoubtedly aware, is so constructed as to prevent the use of any internal combustion engine within a dozen miles of the Elect-no. In this case, no aircraft, nor landcraft, utilizing internal combustion, could enter our zone.

Baren Darl seemed somewhat relieved at this precaution, but his attitude to a certain extent began

to affect the rest of us. To prepare for any eventuality, I had the Fission-Suppressor activated. This, of course, automatically made it impossible for nuclear fission to take place within a hundred miles of our ship.

THAT measure pleased Baren Darl exceedingly in view of the fact that the Earth nations seemed to be spending practically all of their military appropriations on their so-called A-Bombs and H-Bombs. According to the radio emanations our Luna base had picked up, the Earthlings were interested in little else in a military way, except possibly bacteriological weapons, and, of course, we were prepared to deal them a strong blow along that line with our lepbonic plague spreading fleas.

At any rate, knowing that we had suppressed the use of their major weapon, the fission bomb, and had prevented transportation from entering the vicinity, we proceeded toward the clearing where the Earthlings had gathered, determined to test the I.Q. Depressor, *nark*, and the lepbonic plague fleas, for it was upon the success of these weapons that our Earth campaign depended.

We proceeded with care toward the clearing on the edge of which our scouts had detected the Earthlings, and carefully approached from behind the one specimen we saw there. Evidently, the others had gone off.

Baren Darl, the only member of our little group who was familiar with the language, acted as spokesman, and we concealed for the moment at least, the purpose of our "visit." The following conversation was recorded by Baren Darl himself and later translated as literally as possible into our own superior language.

Earthling: "Huh? What's that?"

Baren Darl: "Have no fear."

Earthling: "Revenooers! Paw! Hank!"

(The meaning of the word *revenooers* was completely unknown to Baren Darl but from the Earthling's tone of voice it is to be assumed that the term is a derogatory one.)

Baren Darl: "We are not revenooers. We are friends."

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "We are not revenooers. We are friends."

Earthling (suspiciously): "Well, you can't have no free corn, if that's what you're looking for. Can't buy none neither. Paw won't sell no raw corn. Says corn ain't fitten to drink unless it's been aged a week."

(This conversation seemed to puzzle Baren Darl and I was beginning to suspect already that his knowledge of the Earthlings was somewhat less than he had led me to believe.)

Baren Darl: "Where are the others?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

(This continual inability on the

Earthling's part to understand the questions put to him by Baren Darl also caused me to wonder whether or not the decals spent on Luna in observing Earth were quite as fruitful as they might have been.)

Baren Darl: "Where are the others?"

Earthling: "Oh, you mean Maw and Paw and Hank and Zeke. They're off looking for Martins."

(Your Omnipotence is of course aware that in the language of the Earthlings our glorious planet is known as *Mars*, and we as *Martians*, or, evidently, as this Earthling pronounced it, *Martius*.)

THIS information was, as you can well imagine, startling, since we had supposed that our landing had been made in the most complete secrecy. What means they had utilized to discover us is unknown.

Baren Darl: "Ahhhhh. And, er . . . what made them suspect there were Martians in the vicinity?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "What made Maw and Paw and Hank and Zeke think there were Martians around?"

Earthling: "Oh."

Baren Darl: "What made them think there were Martians about?"

Earthling: "Paw says he can smell him a Martin from most twenty miles away. Paw's got a regular feelin' for Martins, like. Paw'd rather shoot him a Martin than eat fried chicken. I wish I could shoot me a Martin, I wish.

Yup, I sure wish I could shoot me a Martin. I wish—"

(This sixth sense of some of the Earthlings had been unsuspected by Baren Darl in spite of his decals of investigation. Evidently, the Earthlings have an unusual ability to detect the presence of alien life forms. Also surprising was the fact that the Earthlings were evidently aware of our plans to conquer their planet and were already worked up to a pitch of patriotism which made them extremely anxious to destroy us.)

Baren Darl turned to me and explained that there were four more of the Earthlings in the woods searching for us and that undoubtedly they would soon return. He suggested that we immediately try some of our weapons upon this specimen.

The plan seemed feasible enough so I ordered one of the warriors to find a suitable liquid in which to place a portion of the poison *mark*.

Ultimate plans, as you are aware, had been to drop, by spacecraft, small containers of *mark* in the reservoirs, rivers and lakes of the Earthlings. One drop was designated to be, as your Omnipotence knows, sufficient to poison a reservoir capable of supplying the water needs of a hundred thousand Earthlings.

Although water was not available, the warrior was soon able to find what was obviously a container for some type of beverage. It was near-

ly full of a colorless fluid.

The following conversation then took place between Baren Darl and the Earthling:

Baren Darl: "What is this?"

Earthling: "Huh? Oh, that's white mule. Yup, sure is."

Baren Darl (puzzled): "I thought a mule was a four legged animal of burden particularly noted for kicking."

Earthling (vaguely): "Paw's white mule's got lots of kick in it. Yup."

UPON finding it was a beverage, as we had suspected, a small quantity of *nark* was quickly inserted.

Baren Darl: "Try a drink."

Earthling: "What say?"

Baren Darl: "Have a drink?"

Earthling: "Uhhhhh. Maybe I will, but don't tell Paw. Paw says I'm simple enough without no white mule."

(Here he took a long draught without seeming effect, although we were expecting him to fall dead at our feet. We stood there staring at him, unbelievably.)

Earthling: "That tasted mighty good. Got more of a kick than usual. Yup, sure did. Tasted like maybe somebody put in a wallop of turpentine."

He seemed perfectly at ease. I turned to Baren Darl and snapped, "The type of poison you recommended seems less than effective."

Baren Darl was obviously shock-

ed. "It is inconceivable," he said. "Possibly the fluid in which we dissolved the *nark* acted as an antidote."

I turned my back on him angrily. "I begin to wonder about the effect of your other weapons!"

He waved to one of the warriors who had been burdened with the I.Q. Depressor. "We'll try this immediate y," he said, anxiety in his tone.

While the machine was being readied, Baren Darl explained its workings to me in some detail. Meanwhile, the Earthling continued to sip at the jug which supposedly contained sufficient poison to eliminate an average large Terran city.

"As you know," Baren Darl told me, "the mind, whether of Earthlings or Martian type, is capable of being either stimulated or depressed. For hundreds of decals our race has possessed chemicals capable of such depression or stimulation. However, to my knowledge, this device is the only one yet developed which can suppress the intelligence quotient of anyone within an area of many square miles.

"The plan for utilizing it is a simple but effective one. When we confront a body of Earthling soldiery, our men need only to turn on the I.Q. Depressor to turn the enemy into brainless idiots. Their defeat would then obviously be quite simple."

"Very well," I told him stiffly, "let us proceed to try it on this Earth-

ling."

THE device seemed quite elementary in construction. Baren Darl activated it by the simple flicking of a switch. We ourselves, of course, were immune to its workings since it was tuned only to the Earth type brain.

"It is now in operation?" I asked Baren Darl.

"Definitely. Watch the Earthling."

"I am watching."

The supposed top authority on Earth and Earthlings approached the specimen and eyed him carefully. The following conversation ensued:

Baren Darl: "How do you feel?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

(Baren Darl seemed pleased at this response, and, indeed, it would seem that the subject was on the verge of idiocy.)

Baren Darl: "How do you feel?"

Earthling: "I guess I feel fine. Yup, yup. Feel fine. —How'd you feel, stranger?"

Baren Darl (scowling): "Does your head feel somewhat different? Does your mind seem more sluggish?"

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "Does your thinking seem weaker?"

Earthling: "Nope. Can't say it does, stranger. Fact is, it'd be purdy hard to make my thinking much weaker. Yup, sure would."

Baren Darl stared at him for a

long period, unbelievably. Obliviously, The I.Q. Depressor had been worthless as far as undermining the earthling's intelligence is concerned.

Finally this alleged authority on Earthlings and upon Earth affairs flashed a look of despair at me, and at the others of us who stood around him.

"The fleas," he blurted finally, "the lepbonic plague fleas. This weapon alone might well destroy the whole population of earth. Bring the fleas."

I said coldly, "We shall see, Baren Darl." Then to one of the warriors, "Bring the fleas that carry this so *deadly*—so Baren Darl tells us—lepbonic plague."

THE Earthling was ignoring us now and had gone back to taking an occasional drink from his jug. Our warrior approached carefully from behind him and dropped a half dozen of the supposedly deadly insects upon the Earthling's back.

We then stood back and watched cautiously. According to Baren Darl, the fast spreading disease should take effect almost immediately.

The Earthling sat there, the I.Q. Depressor still tuned on but obviously unable to lower his intelligence an iota. He continued to sip from the jug of white mule, which had enough *nark* in it to kill thousands. Occasionally, he scratched himself.

"I guess I'll take me a nap," he said thickly, his words slurred. He

scratched himself once again, yawned deeply, and slumped against the tree, obviously in sleep.

Baren Darl looked at me triumphantly. "The reaction is somewhat different than we'd expected, but obviously the fleas have given him lepbonic plague. This weapon at least is as successful as we had—"

I peered down at the Earthling suspiciously. His clothes were disarranged and torn. I pointed at a speck on his uncouthly hairy chest.

"And what is that?" I snapped at Baren Darl.

He bent down to see what I indicated.

"It seems to be one of the fleas," he told me.

"Then what is it doing on its back with its feet up in the air?"

"It seems indisposed."

"It seems *dead* you numbskull!" I roared at him. "After biting this Earthling your fleas have died!"

In a high rage, I strode up and down the clearing trying to coordinate my thoughts to the point where I could make an intelligent decision on this situation. Obviously, a crisis was at hand. Using these weapons devised by our scientists, after detailed instructions on their construction by Baren Darl and his group of efficient "experts," would obviously be suicidal. They were completely worthless.

I came to a snap conclusion. Our plan must be to reveal ourselves to the Earthlings as Martians and pretend to come bearing them only

good will and desire for peace and commerce. A few months on their planet, closely—but unbeknown to them—studying their life form, should give us ample opportunity to plan more effective weapons against them.

This then was my decision.

I snapped to Baren Darl. "Awaken the Earthman; tell him that we are Martians and that we seek peace with the inhabitants of Earth."

THERE was some difficulty in the awakening, but finally Baren Darl succeeded. The Earthling shook his head groggily and scowled at my interpreter. The following conversation ensued:

Baren Darl: "Awaken. We have a message of great importance for you."

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "We have a message for you."

Earthling (Rolling over on his other side): "Oh."

Baren Darl said impressively: "In the name of the Most High, the Glorious, the Omnipotent, Omnipresent, and Omniscient, the Lord of the Seven, the Leader of the Chosen, Neo Geek XXXVIII; we bring you greetings from the Martians."

Earthling: "Huh?"

Baren Darl: "We Martians offer you the friendship and the good will of a people that—"

Earthling: "Martins! Are you'uns Martins?"

Baren Darl: "That is correct. We Martians come with the greetings and—"

At this point, your Omnipotence, my account must of necessity be somewhat vague, for even after we had made good our escape back to the spacecruiser, bearing our more serious casualties with us, we were unable to agree among ourselves on just what had happened.

Baren Darl, who is now under arrest and in the darkest recess of the Spacecruiser 12B44 laden down with chains, is of the opinion that the Earthling was none other than either Superman or the Lone Ranger in disguise. He contends that both of these earthling warriors are prone to adopt disguises in this manner, revealing themselves only at the last moment to their enemies.

Suffice to say, however, that we were all successful in making good our retreat to the spacecruiser although all of our equipment and supplies were destroyed in the melee. Upon regaining the spacecraft we blasted off hurriedly, to return to our own sacred planet.

I recommend, your Omnipotence, that the plans to subjugate the planet Earth be indefinitely postponed in view of the fact that our specially designed weapons proved worthless and in particular view of the abilities of Earthling warriors.

I further recommend that the unspeakable Baren Darl, who obviously frittered away his time during

the decals spent on Luna supposedly studying the Earthlings, be sent to the Nairebis Salt Mines.

Obediently,  
Seegeel Wan

Commander Spacecruiser 12B44.

\* \* \*

**M**AW and Paw Coy and Hank and Zeke came back into the clearing wearily. The boys had done a lot of tramping and were hungry for their vittles, and Maw was feeling bodacious about their taking off to go hunting for Martins. Paw had told her to shut up two or three times but it hadn't been much use.

Lem was sitting on an upended mash barrel loading his old shotgun and grinning vacuously. He seemed unaware of the fact that the stock of the gun was a splintered ruin.

"Guess what, Paw," he yelled. "I got me a Martin. I got me a whole passel of Martins, Paw, I sure did. Yup, I—"

Paw Coy grunted, and started poking around in the vittles Maw had brought up from the cabin.

The boys leaned their rifles up against the oak and each picked up a handy fruit jar of corn squeezins.

Hank said nastily, "Sure you got a whole passel of Martins, Lem. In yore sleep, you got a passel of Martins."

Lem said belligerently, "Don't you go a talkin' thataway Hank,



or I'll . . . I'll throw you up into the tree the way I did that time you hit me with the ax. I did so get me some Martins. I was a sittin' here when a whole passel come outen the woods. Didn't know they was Martins at first. Then—"

Maw Coy handed him a chunk of corn pone. "Now you be quiet,

Lem, and eat your vittles. Sure you got yourself a Martin, Lem."

A thin trickle of brown ran down from the side of Lem's mouth. He spit on the ground before him, with an air of happy belligerence.

"I sure did, Maw. I sure got me a passel of Martins. Yup, I sure did."

## THE END

## Psychic "Alarm"

COMMONLY one hears people say that they have a "mental alarm clock" with which they can awaken themselves in the morning simply by *willing* to do so before they retire. Recently scientists have questioned this amazing faculty and subjected it to tests. And contrary to their expectations it proved to be perfectly true!

On the basis of an examination of hundreds of test subjects, it was found that fifty percent of the people selected at random have this faculty—and they are able to awaken within fifteen minutes of the mental time they set.

A smaller proportion of people can do even better—they awaken in a matter of a minute or two of their set time. No explanation of this phenomenon has been found, at least no simple physical explanation. But since scientists have considerable respect for the ideas promulgated by Dr. Rhine with his extra-sensory perception, it is suspected that the answer will lie somewhere in that mysterious realm.

## Mongol Man

WITH the vast hordes of Asia leaping at our throats, it hardly seems a likely time to confirm the scientific belief that the North American Indian stemmed from the Asian land-mass, but science is no respecter of race or prestige.

Because of the large amount of geological and anthropological work being done in Alaska, some interesting facts are being uncovered. Numerous flint and stone tools and artifacts have been discovered which bear a definite relation to materials used by more modern Eskimos and Indians. Anthropologists regard this as conclusive evidence that the American Indian has his tribal origin in Mongolia. During the ice-age a huge mass of solid ice covered what we call the Bering Strait. Across this bridge, some twenty thousand years ago, men made their way attracted by game. Further study of this matter now depends upon scientists examining Mongolian evidence—and that appears unlikely for the present!

# FOLLOW THE WEEDS

*By Margaret St. Clair*

**It was peaceful on Mars, a good place for Earth to send its sick during a war. And the Martians didn't seem to mind the intrusion . . .**

**T**UESDAY, March 1st (*earth style*). I have more fever today. The bed covers seem to scorch my skin, and the air this afternoon is stifling. It is hardly possible to realize that in a few

hours, as soon as the sun sets, I will be lying here quaking with the cold. I pile everything in the shack—dresses, coats, pillows, even newspapers—on top of me, and my teeth chatter all night long. And





yet this climate, with its fantastic extremes of heat and cold, is supposed to be a specific cure for radiation disease!

*Tuesday night, the same date.*

No, I don't believe it. The government shipped us here not to cure us, but to get rid of us. We must have been a fine ghastly Death's head at the feast, with our scaling skins and protruding bones. And then, marooning us here on Mars is much cheaper than caring for us on earth would have been. With the food rocket sent us every two weeks, the government's responsibility is at an end. Out of sight, out of mind.

It's odd, then, but I'm glad to be here on Mars. It suits me. It's quiet and peaceful and dead. Best of all, it isn't earth. I don't think I could put into words how much I have come to hate earth.

I'll have to stop. My hands are shaking too much for me to write.

*Friday, March 4th.* I've been wondering about that—why I hate earth so. My fellow-sufferers and I see very little of each other, but I know from our brief exchanges that they share my feelings. Why? Is that emotion—and the dislike we radiation sufferers have toward each other—nothing more than one of the symptoms of our disorder, as the doctors insist? Maybe so. Yet I sometimes think that the disgust we biological workers felt at seeing our work perverted—our

great work, the artificial production of life—perverted toward deadly ends, is what has sickened us. We are not only suffering with radiation disease, we are sick with self-contempt.

It is over now, at any rate. Our side won. Earth is united at last, and on our side's terms. Earth is—or ought to be—enjoying its complacent love-feast, to the full. We can't bother them. We're on Mars.

*MONDAY night, March 7th.* I wonder if I'll ever see a Martian. They say there are still some around, down in the ruined city, though nobody I have talked to has seen one. Lucky for them, I think, that their world was burnt out, used up, done for, before we landed here. Mars is sub-sub-marginal. The only thing one could use it for would be as part of the mix in making concrete. (That sounds more flippant than I had intended. But the effect the enormous desolation of Mars has on one is, at times, to induce a defensive sort of flippancy.)

At any rate, I'd like to see a Martian. What brought them so low, after they had risen so high? And in less than fifty of our years? That's a problem earth minds will be busy with as soon as earth's own pressing problems have been dealt with. I hope that doesn't happen for a long time. Mars ought to stay as it is—sterilized without any history.

*Tuesday, March 8th.* I feel definitely worse today. Last night was bitter cold, the coldest here yet, and though the morning is well advanced, I still haven't stopped shivering. I'll open a can of self-heating rations. Food might warm me up.

*Saturday, March 19th.* I've been ill, really ill, for more than a week. I don't remember much about it; I must have been out of my head most of the time. Now that I'm better again I feel an odd wish to walk about, to explore things. Of course I'm not strong enough.

*Monday, March 21st.* I saw my first Martians today. I still am not quite sure they were real.

A little before noon, when the day was beginning to get hot, I heard a knock at the door. I hobbled over to it, leaning on my stick. (I'm only thirty-six, though I look like an old woman. But I'm not going to get bitter about it again. I'm safe here, on Mars.) I expected, of course, that it would be one of my neighbors. I was already trying to conceal my irritation at being disturbed, was getting ready to be polite. And then it was two little people, neither of them as tall as my chest.

I stood there gaping at them. I didn't realize at first that they were children; I thought they were dwarfish. They were wearing sandals and little blue tunics, faded and very crudely patched. I remember

wondering why they didn't take better care of themselves. Then the little girl, the older of the two, smiled at me, and I saw neither of them was over eight or nine (measured by an earth scale, of course). They had sandy hair and skin, and deep blue, almost turquoise, eyes.

It was the little boy who spoke first. "Food?" he asked. He was pulling at the skirt of his tunic nervously.

"Do you speak English?" I answered stupidly.

"A little." (Or did he say it? Now that the children have gone, I am wondering if there wasn't some telepathy involved.)

"What kind of food?"

"Anything you can spare."

I WENT over to the cupboard and opened it. They were looking at me intently; I suppose I must have been rather a ghastly sight. Thank goodness, there's no mirror in my shack. I got out two packages of Vitaphase from my last month's rations—I never liked the stuff—and added a big can of beefsteak protose, which I *do* like. I gave the packages to the children, and they murmured "Thank you" politely and turned to put them in their cart. I call it a cart, but it wasn't a cart, exactly; it had runners like a sled, I suppose because of the sand. It was made out of yellowish wood.

There were a number of other

food parcels in the cart, so I imagine the children must have been begging from some of the other members of our diseased little settlement. The two of them began to pull on the straps at the front of the cart and turn it around. It was hard work for them.

"Wait," I said on impulse.

They stopped obediently. "When will you be back?" I asked. I don't know why I said that.

The boy hesitated, arranging his words. "In a week," he said haltingly. "Maybe in two."

"Oh. Good-bye." I watched them till they were out of sight. After they were gone I compared their quiet, polite behavior with the way earth children would have conducted themselves. They were pretty children, too, though their ragged clothing kept them—I think—from being as attractive as they might have been.

At any rate, I was sorry to see them go. How long has it been since I was sorry to part with anyone? Not since I had the first symptoms of my disease.

*Tuesday, March 29.* The medical rocket from earth came today. Unfortunately, I'd lost account of the time. If I'd realized that it was coming, I'd have hidden myself.

The doctor gave me a thorough going-over. Ugh, how I hated having him examine me. When he'd finished he told me I was a little better. He said something about

going back to earth eventually. I suppose he meant to be encouraging and kind. Why can't they leave us alone?

*Sunday, April 3rd.* The children came back today. I was really glad to see them. Curious, how I can't stand even the slightest contact with my own people, and yet welcomed them. Perhaps my human sociability still exists, though it has been deflected from its proper goal.

This time they weren't drawing the cart. They had harnessed huge beetles to it.

Actually they weren't insects, of course; because of the inefficiency with which insects aerate their blood, four inches of length, for an insect, is just about the top size. But they did look like much magnified specimens of *Phanaeus difformis*, the dung beetle. They had the shining green carapace and even the spot on the back. They were about the size of St. Bernards.

THE children were amused by my open-mouthed incredulity. "Horses," the little girl said in explanation. "Father let us have them today."

So they had a father. I was pleased. "Come in," I told them. "I'll get the things." They stepped over the threshold obediently. They looked around them wonderingly while I got the Vitaphase.

"Our house," the little boy said with an air of authority, "Our house

is much nicer than this."

The little girl was walking about lightly, touching the bedding with the tips of her fingers, lifting up glasses and putting them down. "Much more nice," she said without turning her head.

I was piqued. "There can't be much to eat in your house, though, if you have to go begging for food," I said after a moment.

"No," the little girl admitted. "But it's nice. I wish you could see it. It's nice."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"By the canal. It's not hard to find it. You just follow the weeds."

I gave them the packages. They thanked me prettily—perhaps they were sorry for their remarks, which were certainly tactless, about their house. They *are* handsome children but their faces, I think, are rather expressionless.

I'll have to stop. My sweat is dripping down so much on the paper that it makes it hard to write.

*Monday, April 11.* I've found that there are two hours of the day when the temperatures here are bearable — in the morning, before the bitter coldness of the night gives place to the scalding heat, and again in the late afternoon, a little before sunset. Lately I've been going outside the cabin and walking about a bit at these times. The prospect from the cabin—it's located on a little rise—isn't pretty, but it's im-

pressive. There's the long road that goes looping past the cabin, the red sands, and the brassy Martian sky. Nothing more.

But I like it. I stand taking deep breaths of the thin air and resting my eyes on emptiness. I like it. I only hope none of my fellow victims acquires a taste for walking out, as I have done. I'd hate to meet anybody.

*Thursday, April 14.* The food rocket came today. There was a novelty in the food packages; two cans of some new stuff called Carbo-mel. It looks as if it might be good. There were a lot of newspapers for us, too. I don't think any of us reads them, but they come in very nicely as auxiliary bedding.

*Monday, April 18.* The children came today, rather late in the afternoon. I gave them one of the cans of Carbo-mel. It *is* good, and I think they will like it.

Odd, but I'm getting quite fond of the children. I look forward to their visits, and wish they could stay longer. They're pretty, of course, and remarkably quiet and well-behaved, but I don't think either of these is the reason why I like them.

Perhaps it's because they're so Martian. Their voices, the color of their skins, their rather expressionless faces, even the way they move their arms and hands—all these things have an indefinable

*Martianness.* When I look at the children, I feel I'm in touch with the essence of this old, quiet, peaceful, subtle world.

**S***SUNDAY, April 24.* Late this afternoon I was out taking the air when I saw something moving in the long shadow of the cabin. I can't imagine what it was. It gave me quite a start. I understood that there were no harmful animals on Mars.

*Saturday, April 30th.* When I was outside, late today, the children appeared. They were in a hurry. I asked them why they came so late, and they said to avoid the heat, which is certainly reasonable. I wish they could have stayed longer. I hope they got home before dark.

*Monday, May 2nd.* I was making the bed this morning when I caught sight of the letters ACC at the head of a newspaper article. (I have been using layers of newspapers between the blankets to keep warm.) ACC, of course, stands for the Android Control Commission, for which I used to work. Before I could stop myself, I had read the article.

It wasn't much—a piece to the effect that the powers of the commission had been extended for two years. But it puzzled me. They told us that all the androids were to be destroyed at the end of the war. (Though, I admit, they'd take some

destroying.) What need would there be for death androids in the wonderful new world that's supposed to be under construction on earth?

*Sunday, May 8th.* I have had a strange experience, a great shock. My head is still in a whirl, not only because of what happened, objectively, but because of what it meant to me personally. Perhaps writing it down and trying to reduce it to order will clarify it for me.

Very well, then. Late yesterday afternoon (was this less than twenty-four hours ago?—it seems impossible) the children came by with the cart and the beetles drawing it. As I was giving them the packages I said jokingly, "Do you still think your house is so much nicer than this?"

"Oh, yes." The little girl hesitated. She looked over at the sun. "Would you like to see it?" she said suddenly. "I don't think mother would mind. You could sit in the cart."

This was the first I had heard of a mother. I felt a quick, intense curiosity. "Is it far?" I asked.

"Not so very," the boy answered. He said something to his sister that I didn't catch, though I thought I heard the word "safe". "You wouldn't have to walk," he said to me. "The horses could draw you."

Usually I hesitate a bit before making up my mind. This time I acted quite unlike myself. "All right," I said promptly.



The children seemed pleased. At any rate, they smiled. With them helping me, I settled myself in the cart, among the packages. I took the stick I use for walking. That was fortunate, as it turned out.

**WE** started. At first the way was downhill and we made good time. I quite enjoyed sitting in the cart and seeing the road slip by. The children crouched on the side of the cart, though now and then they would get off and run behind.

Then we left the road and struck off across the sand. Still we were moving fairly fast. I saw a row of grayish vegetation ahead and decided that must be what the children had meant when they spoke of following the weeds to their home. The girl nodded when I asked her this. The cart slowed to a walk.

The sun was sinking. The air was cooling and the sky began to grow red. The children said something to each other. I thought they sounded disturbed.

"We're going too slow," the girl said, biting her fingers. "We've got to get home before dark. There're—" she hesitated—"bad things out."

Once more they conferred. They spoke to the beetles. The cart veered, moving in another direction. The beetles were making a most peculiar noise with their mandibles. The children got behind the cart and began to push it along.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Short cut," the boy replied brief-

ly. "Through the city. I wish we hadn't brought you. It's your weight that's making us go slow."

I didn't say anything. I suppose it was true, but they certainly should have told me. I hadn't realized I was making them run any risk.

We reached the streets of the city. It was a pile of ruins—ruins are all the same, whether they're on Mars or on earth—with now and then the facade of a building still standing upright. The sun was very low now, and street and buildings alike were flooded with an intense burning red. It was a ghastly color, really—like blood turned into light.

The little girl began whimpering. "Be quiet," her brother told her. "*They'll* hear." He turned his head uneasily.

"I'm afraid."

"Maybe they won't bother us. That's why we brought her. Maybe she'll scare them away. Push!" He said the words bravely enough, but his voice was quavering.

Once more the girl and her brother began to push. I felt extremely sorry for them. (I didn't, just then, understand what the boy meant about having brought me). I put my stick over the side of the cart and began to use it to push us along, as people pole a boat. It helped. We moved more rapidly. All this time, naturally, the beetles were pulling as hard as they could. It surprised me to find how little they accomplished. There seemed to be no muscle inside their glossy green shells.

We came to a cross street and

turned. Here the city was less ruinous. I was trembling from my exertions—and partly, I suppose, from fear—but I couldn't help stealing fascinated glances at the buildings as we grated past. It was the first Martian city I had seen. The architecture was fantastic—fretted, lacy stalagmites, like blunter Gothic, intermixed with glass, bulging balls, bubbles, orbs. And all, of course, suffused with the same swimming, hateful red.

The little boy said, between gasps, "Don't look . . . things."

"Why not?" I noticed I was speaking in a low tone.

". . . Bad."

He was warning me. I have no one but myself to blame that I kept on looking and finally saw.

**I**T was behind the facade of a building where the other three walls were gone; I didn't see it until we were well past and I was looking back. At first I made out the whitish things piled in a loose stack behind the remaining wall. The light was bad. I peered at them doubtfully. Some were round, and some were long and knobby. How my heart did pound when I realized they were bones! And sitting among them quite motionless was a slender orange thing, much taller than a man. It might have been made out of loosely jointed jackstraws. Then it moved.

I was too frightened to cry out, but the beetles must have scented it. At any rate they made a great click-

ing with their jaws and in their terror we gained a few yards. I pushed with my stick in a perfect frenzy. The street began to slope down a little. I felt like cheering when the beetles broke into a run.

Miraculously we were out of the city and on to the sands again. I supposed we were safe, that the danger was confined to the city. I stopped using my stick for a moment. I gave a great sigh.

Then I heard a rustle behind us. That was the worst moment of any, I think. I didn't dare look. Once more I began pushing. The sun sank. It sank abruptly, as if it had been pinched out.

There were terrible minutes of flight in the twilight. Twilight is short on Mars. Once the boy gasped, ". . . just . . . little . . . farther . . ." The beetles were snorting and jetting out a grayish froth. I pushed with my stick until I was sure I was going to have a heart attack. Then it was quite dark. The rustle came up.

There was a struggle in the darkness. I hit out again and again with my stick at an invisible rubbery thing that couldn't be hurt. No matter how I hit, it was perfectly silent. I don't know what happened, exactly; it seemed that we were there a long time. The beetles were rearing and plunging against their harnesses.

The cart slewed around twice wildly. I grabbed at the sides to keep from falling out. There was a tearing noise. One of the children screamed. Then we were moving, downhill it seemed, and very fast.

There was a moment of penetration, like a diaphragm opening. The transition from the swirling darkness to the lighted hall was like a child's waking screaming from its nightmare into the light.

For a moment I could only sit there in the cart, blinking at the light and holding on to the sides. Then I realized that we were safe, we'd escaped, everything was all—

It wasn't. The little girl and one of the horses were gone. They were outside, back there in the night.

I crawled out of the cart, helping myself with my stick. I stood leaning on it and trembling, looking around the blue-lighted hall anxiously. I suppose I was hoping she might have gone into one of the rooms that opened from it. My eyes met those of the little boy. He put his head down in the crook of his arm and began to cry. It was like the noise a frightened puppy makes.

A MAN came out of the room at the head of the hall. He looked so much like the boy—the same build, the same handsome, rather impassive face—that I knew who he was at once. He was wearing a gray tunic, belted at the waist, that was torn and patched.

For a moment he stood looking at us in silence. I think I heard him draw in his breath. He came toward the cart and the crying boy, shaking his head. His expression was rueful and annoyed. "Yes," he said, "Oh, yes."

I didn't say anything. I was feel-

ing weak, as if I were going to faint, and out of things. But, just as if I had said something, he answered me. "I can't go after her," he said sharply. "It's impossible. I'd only be killed. If they've—" he hesitated—"got her, nobody can help her. I'm sorry." He sounded annoyed with me.

He turned to the boy. "What were you doing out so late?" he demanded.

"We thought we'd be safe with her." The boy pointed at me. "They never bother earth people."

"I suppose the smell is different," the man said, as if considering. He pleted his lip and looked at me.

"Can't you do something?" I burst out. "Take weapons, guns, go after her?"

"Weapons aren't any use," he answered. "They're invulnerable."

My knees wouldn't hold me up any longer. I sank down on the floor. It was a sort of rubbery tile, faintly warm to the touch. "What are they?" I asked. My voice was high and sounded off in my ears. "The things in the city, I mean."

The father seemed to hunt for words. "Androids," he answered at last. "We made them to help us in the war. Then they—"

There was a scratching at the end of the hall from which we had entered. I turned toward it, my heart leaping up in my throat. The little girl came stumbling in, through a sort of diaphragm which closed behind her. Her tunic was torn and she was a ghastly yellow-white.

I cried out in relief. The little boy ran toward her; he, at least, showed some proper feeling. But the father remained looking at her indifferently, his hands at his sides. I had a dizzying sense of anti-climax, of being an actor in some badly-written play where I did not even know the lines of my part.

"You're all right?" he said to her at last. "—What happened to the horse?"

The boy took his arm away from around her. "She's only scared," he said. "What happened to the horse, Marle?"

"He . . . stayed to fight . . . it," she answered. "That's . . . how . . . I got away." The child was almost too exhausted to speak.

"Oh." The man looked at her a moment longer. "It will be hard for us, having only one horse," he said. I had a shocking impression that he was more upset by the loss of the beetle than he would have been by hers. Then he seemed to dismiss the subject. "Go wash your face and hands," he said. "We'll see what you've brought." He began to unload the cart.

**A** WOMAN came out of a room to the left. She was extremely good-looking, one might almost have said beautiful. She had dark turquoise eyes and rich golden hair. But her face had the glassy impassivity I was coming to hate. Her husband said something to her. She stood looking at me briefly. "You'll have to stay here for tonight, I suppose,"

she said to me.

And that was all. Again I had that sense of outrageous anti-climax. She wasn't curious, she wasn't upset, she wasn't interested. She took some cans and packages from the cart and went back into the room with them.

After a little hesitation, I followed her. The room was unusually large (it seemed like a ballroom, after my crowded shack), though the ceiling was low. Down each of the two long walls there was a dusty row of engaged pinkish marble columns, and two big shabby divans stood facing each other. The room's dim illumination came from the ceiling itself.

I sat down on one of the divans for a moment, but I was too tired and too tense to rest. While the woman was getting the supper I hobbled about the room looking at the things—there were many of them, most of them beautiful, or strange, or intricately interesting—in the niches between the marble pilasters. There was dust on everything. She seemed to disapprove of my curiosity—she kept raising her head to look at me.

We ate from a long table of pinkish wood. It was gritty with the pervasive Martian dust. They ate, I mean—I could only drink a little broth. No one spoke. But when the meal was over, she said to me, rather resentfully, "You don't know how much trouble we've had." It sounded as if she were answering my thoughts.

She made up a pallet for me on the floor of one of the rooms. I hadn't thought I'd be able to sleep,

but the bed was comfortable and the warmth of the room (I suppose the house had its own power source) was wonderfully agreeable after the iciness of my shack at night. I slept soddenly.

She woke me as soon as it was light. She gave me directions how to get back to my shack (nothing at all was said about taking me back in the cart). As I was leaving I said, "Why don't you sell some of the things in your house? You could have plenty of food then. You could even go to earth, if you wanted. Wouldn't that be better for you? Your things are very valuable."

She looked at me with more emotion than I had yet seen her display. "Oh, *na*. I couldn't do that." She went back into the house through the diaphragm opening with her head held high.

It took me a long time to get back to my shack. I went along beside the canal as she had told me, following the weeds. I had to stop every few feet to rest. The sky was like molten brass. It was early afternoon when I finally got here, wringing wet with sweat.

And now that I'm back, safe enough (and sound? I wonder), I've got to try to understand, to assimilate, what happened and what it meant to me. I feel deeply confused. I am sure of this, and only this: everything has been changed.

**M**ONDAY, May 9th. I didn't sleep at all last night.

*Tuesday, May 10.* I have been thinking a lot. I am still trying to understand.

*Thursday, May 12th.* Making this analysis has been hard for me. Time after time I have wanted to stop thinking, to bury my face in my hands and let myself weep. But now I think I know how it was.

I fell in love with Mars because it wasn't earth. I hated earth. I couldn't endure it, because it had hurt me so. There was something so *good* about Mars—its silence, its emptiness, its desolation. I needed it. I could grow fond of the children because they weren't earth children. I was fond of their Martianness. And then the bubble broke. Or, to use another metaphor, the Martian air castle came crashing about my ears.

Yes, I was in love with Mars. But I remained an earth woman. It wasn't so much that the children were merely using me when they invited me to see their "nice house." (I wonder why they didn't simply abandon me when they found I slowed them down? I dare say they just didn't think of it.) It isn't even my new knowledge that the emptiness and silence of Mars are a mask for a special kind of life. Incidentally, I think there is no doubt that the androids, escaping from control, were what destroyed Martian civilization. No, it is something else than these that has shaken me.

Wher the father didn't try to save his daughter, when the mother

didn't embrace her barely-rescued children, they were behaving like Martians. I had no right to be horrified at their egotistical coldness, their impassive self-sufficiency. It was a typical Martian coldness—temperamental, I think, and not the result of bad circumstances. We earth people, God knows, have had enough troubles in the last years, but they haven't made us cold and indifferent. Rather, we've become hysterical.

As I was saying, I had no right to be horrified by them. But I was. I am a human being. And I was horrified by their *inhumanity*.

*Sunday, May 15.* I have decided. I am going back.

Back home, back to earth. I think I am somewhat better, physically, but even if I'm not, it doesn't matter. Earth has mistreated me, but I remain her daughter. Now that I've admitted my feelings to myself, I find I'm sick for earth.

The medical rocket arrives tomorrow. I am sure that I can persuade the doctor to let me go back on it.

*Monday, May 16.* The medical

rocket didn't come. They sent a food rocket instead. This is the first time such a thing has happened. I am very much surprised.

Also, there were no newspapers with the food packages. I wonder why? Always before there have been bales of them. I got one piece of mail, a letter from my sister.

*Later.* How I wish I hadn't thrown Thea's earlier letters away unopened! I have been through my wastebasket carefully, but I can't find a scrap of them. At any rate, this is what (after some news about her husband and her children) she says:

"We are all sure the government is censoring the news. There must have been more trouble with the androids. Last week we were told to carry weapons. And now we have been urgently warned not to leave our houses for any reason at night."

. . . I have read her letter twice. I don't understand it. I'm afraid. I want to go home. Why didn't the medical rocket come? Oh, what is happening on earth?

THE END

## Regeneration

THE ability of newts, salamanders and tadpoles to regenerate lost limbs is amazing, especially in such high orders of living things. Dr. Singer, a researcher in neuro-anatomical surgery, has been fascinated by this phenomenon for a long

time and has done considerable research in it, endeavoring to discover the cause.

Like most scientific discoveries, his first clue was provided by a guess. He learned that if he damaged the nerves in severing the

limbs of newts, the newts would be unable to regenerate the lost ones. Evidently then the answer lay somewhere in the nerve. Proceeding on this hypothesis, he made his next attack—this time on the frog which ordinarily is unable to practice regeneration.

He severed the foreleg of a frog. Then he made a slit in the hind leg, carefully brought out the large nerve and attached it to the stump of the foreleg. The results were amazing. The frog regenerated the

foreleg it had lost, not very well it is true, but at least regeneration occurred!

A discovery like this, by itself perhaps of no great importance, still has tremendous potentialities pointing the way toward a possible attempt at regeneration in still higher life-forms. Perhaps the technique might someday in the future be extended to human beings. The way of biology is slow—especially experimental biology—but it leads to astounding results!

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## *L' Affaire Saucer*

THE case of the Flying Saucers, while temporarily out of the public's interest, is a serious matter, not to be regarded lightly nor to be forgotten. We may yet deal with its repercussions. Like so many events, its strangeness, its definite air of the outre appealed to the imagination of most people — and yet like so many things which have captured the public fancy, its importance is overshadowed by newer things.

But we have not heard the last of these disc-like vehicles which spread their influence around the world. Too many utterly reliable observers have testified to their existence to be merely figments of an inflamed imagination.

Judging from the military reactions all over the world, it is a certainty that they were — and are — not craft belonging to any government. Granting their existence—and one must, in light of the unimpeachable observations testifying to their reality—the Flying Saucers must have an origin and purpose, unless we are ready to dis-

own reason completely. Applying the most elementary analysis to the problem leads us to the inevitable conclusion that they are extra-terrestrial. Beyond that we may not go, for they could be from anywhere in the universe. Despite the so-called analyses of numerous writers, we think it is pretty safe to conclude that no one really knows their berth or reason for being. That they did not behave—this may be disputed—inimically toward humans, it is unquestionable that they were of the nature of an observation party themselves. It would be interesting to know the reaction of their operators to the Terran scene.

Opinion alone suggests to us that we shall hear of the Flying Saucers again. Whether it will be in as equally an impersonal light cannot be said of course, but any intelligent creatures who have visited the Earth certainly would be unable to refrain from doing it again.

It would be worth while to them to take another gander at this crazy-quilt world if only for kicks! They might get a charge out of us!

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# DOUBLE IDENTITY

**Grant Dermitt's stories showed remarkable creative ability. His hero, Fleetwood Cassidy, was the greatest fictional character—alive! . . .**

**H**E demonstrated again that rangey reach of his and slammed a fistful of hard knuckles into the putty face in front of him. Mario went down on the thick carpet, his fat nose spurting blood like a drinking fountain for vampires. He was just another one of those larded slobs and, true to the type, he began to blubber. The blonde in the corner froze in place like a lead statue in a snow storm.

"Wait!" Mario whined. "Wait a minute, Cassidy. I'm not stalling. I just want to make a deal, that's all."

"You've made a deal," Fleetwood snapped. "How do you like it, fat boy? Now where's the stuff?"

Mario lolled his head to one side, holding his hand to his nose. Fleetwood raised his foot, and he came around fast.

"Don't!" he said. "Over there on the mantle, in the ivory box."

Fleetwood kept them both covered and crossed to the mantle. He picked up the box and flipped back the lid. Expensive fire, the cold kind of fire that comes from stones, flashed out at him. He closed it again and dropped it into his pocket.

"Look, Cassidy," Mario said, still sitting on the floor, "look, I took the





By  
Charles F. Myers



rocks, I admit that, but I didn't rod Blanchard. Somebody else cooled him before I ever got to the damp . . ."

"Sure, Mario, sure," Fleetwood nodded, "you're the neat type. You just ran over in your dust cap to tidy up the death room. My client will be tickled to pieces to find out what a nice orderly vulture you turned out to be." He swiveled around toward the blonde. "And you'd better get yourself a new playmate, lamb-chop. This one won't even be able to keep you in rompers from now on." He gave Mario one last glance, to warn him to stay down, and legged it for the door. This was the kind of place and the kind of people he loved to leave behind.

She must have pole-vaulted across the room to have made it so fast; he was just reaching for the knob when her perfume pressed in on him from behind. He turned around, left his hand resting on the knob.

"Yeah?" he said.

"What you said," she drawled in a lazy, boudoir voice, "I mean about me getting myself a new playmate. You're right about that, Cassidy . . ." She held the idea out to him, waiting for him to take it up on the beat. He let it lay. She smiled, but her eyes turned as hard as a bride's biscuits. "Anyway, you could be right."

"And so . . . ?" Fleetwood asked.

The smile stayed fixed, but she shrugged. "So maybe the music we'd make together wouldn't exactly be Brahms. But it wouldn't be Guy

Lombardo, either. You've got the rocks, but your client doesn't know a thing about that unless you tell her. I have . . . other things. And I can be sweet when I want." She moved closer and planted an arm around his neck, leaning in to make herself comfortable. "I can be so sweet you almost couldn't stand it. Almost."

"So can a cyanide soda," Fleetwood said dully. "Sweet and final." He lifted her arm away from his neck, and it might have been a noose. He let it drop.

When he went out the door her smile had got itself all bent.

THE hallways of the Grande Apartments were carpeted as thickly as the living quarters. It was the only place in town where you could sneak up on someone at a dead trot. Fleetwood plushed along in the direction of the elevators. He was nearly there, just abreast of a drinking fountain, when it hit him, just like it had those other times before. He stopped and reached out a hand to steady himself against the fountain.

In a moment his head began to clear a little and he straightened, running a lean, trembling hand through his carrot-colored hair. Even so he clung to the fountain a bit longer and when he finally let go it was only to free his hand so he could check his pulse. The attacks were coming closer together now, he reflected. But so were the events which usually led up to them—the

incidents of violence, the sight of blood.

It was crazy, a sort of general softening and mellowing, the kind of thing that makes you bait for the boys with the cushiony couches and the expensive ears. It was downright absurd. He had to get hold of himself.

He searched his mind warily for his own thoughts, as an agent might search for saboteurs. He looked for those innermost stirrings of the soul, the ones that breathe of fear and anxiety. But there was nothing. And that was crazy too. It was as though he'd never had a thought in his life, or even an experience from which to draw a thought. It was like amnesia, and yet it wasn't amnesia at all. He knew that he was Fleetwood Cassidy and he knew that he was a private investigator who worked independently. But that was where he ran into the wall. But the really frightening part of it was the veiled feeling that even if he should manage to scale the wall and look behind it, he'd find—exactly nothing!

Of course, he told himself, the thing to do was to think back to that place in time where the spells—the softening—had begun. There lay the real clue. But it was so much easier said than done. He could project his thoughts backwards, after some effort, to the day before when he had jumped into a taxi, shouted to the driver to "follow that car," then found himself in a nervous panic lest they were travelling at a rate of speed in excess of the legal limit.

But that was just another small, humiliating example—by no means the beginning.

HE forced his thoughts back still farther, but it was rather like ramrodding a rifle with a ballbat. He arrived finally, by dint of the most extreme concentration, back in the apartment of that sloe-eyed, full-lipped and tempestuous beauty, Dolores Nobella. He had given her a hundred collars for evidence against her mother, and she had lifted her skirts with a graceful, crimson-taloned hand and inserted the bills deftly in the top of her stocking. All of a sudden it had come to Fleetwood that Dolores, even for a girl with long legs, wore disturbingly tall stockings—and he had turned away, coloring at the collar. He, Fleetwood Cassidy, had blushed, and what was more, now that he thought of it he blushed again.

That was the end. Or rather the beginning — the beginning of Fleetwood's strange new emotional pattern.

At any rate he felt better having at least established the point of departure, even if it didn't make the riddle of his growing metamorphosis one whit clearer. He boosted himself away from the drinking fountain and continued along the hallway with the eerie feeling that he was moving toward some prearranged meeting with Destiny.

He was still a soul adrift, so to speak, when he pushed his way out of the Grande and stood pondering

in the afternoon sun. The sidewalk, the street, the traffic, the confused and crowded skyline — all of these things, in turn, presented new problems of identification and orientation, as though he was seeing them all for the first time and didn't know quite what to make of them. And yet . . . And yet—what? It was as though his mind had made another sudden turning and again brought him up against the blank wall. The past, even the immediate past that included the events in the Grande Apartments, slipped away from him and were lost. When he tried to think back there were only words in his mind in place of faces, places, event—words like caper, rod, dame, murder. They brought with them no mental association with anything real or experienced. He passed a hand slowly over his eyes. Surely he was losing his mind.

With heavy concentration he forced his attention to the row of automobiles along the curb. He had the feeling that one of them belonged to him, but he hadn't the slightest idea of which one it might be. He closed his eyes and waited. The spell would pass. The others had.

HE opened his eyes and hopefully surveyed the row of cars for a second time. There was something about the blue convertible. He moved forward, thinking to check the registration slip, when a smart-looking woman in green tweed walked up to the car, got inside, glanced at him curiously and quickly started

the engine. He edged back, coloring about the neck and ears.

He waited a bit longer but the lost feeling didn't leave him. If anything it only grew stronger. He turned aimlessly back toward the Grande Apartments, then started with a gasp of dismay.

The Grande Apartments were gone, and in their place was an establishment called The Handy Drug Store! Fleetwood tried to think clearly, more clearly than he ever had before. It wasn't any good; there wasn't any logical answer. Warily, he approached the store and went inside.

He by-passed the cigarette counter and the magazine racks, noted their contents curiously, and climbed aboard a stool at a long counter. At least it was a place to sit down and rest. A girl approached from the other side of the counter and made a quick pass at the area in front of him with a paper napkin.

"Yes?" she inquired.

Fleetwood turned and looked at her, and it happened. His eyebrows shot up, his heart stood still. He felt faintly ill in a surprised, elated sort of way. Never had he dreamed that there could be such a creature. This girl, this . . . this fragment of heaven! She couldn't possibly be real. She was so extraordinarily ordinary!

"What would you like?" the girl said, and Fleetwood tingled anew just at the sound of her voice; its tone was so enchantingly flat and nasal. Never had he dreamed that

it was possible for any woman to speak with so little innuendo. He was shaken to the very core. He realized that because of this girl something very important was happening to him, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. The mystery of the disappearing Grande Apartments faded from his mind.

"I beg your pardon?" he murmured in an effort to induce the girl to speak again.

"I said, what do you want?" the girl repeated, and her grey-brown eyes looked into his unconcernedly.

It was too good to be true! Here she was, this extraordinary female person, apparently eager, even impatient, to fulfill his slightest wish, just for the naming. Fleetwood took a firm grip on the edge of the counter. If this was a dream he didn't want to interrupt it by being too rash. His eyes dwelt on her hair, tabulating the exact measure of its fascinating dullness.

"Bourbon and water?" he said cautiously. "Double?" He couldn't remember exactly what it meant, but it seemed a likely entry.

"Huh?" the girl said. "What was that?"

FLEETWOOD'S heart sank; he'd said the wrong thing, and the first crack out of the box, too. Obviously, he had blundered somehow into a strange land where people spoke in prepared dialogues, and the moment he'd opened his mouth he'd gone up in his lines. There was a proper response to the question,

"what do you want?" but "bourbon and water" was not it. He glanced around nervously as two young women arrived at the magazine racks behind him and simultaneously picked up copies of the *New York Toast*. Neither returned his glance or even gave the slightest indication that they were aware of his existence, much less his dilemma. He looked back at the girl who had now begun to eye him rather curiously. Plainly she was waiting for him to get on with it; he had to try again, no matter how much he might disappoint both of them.

"Scotch and soda?" he offered timidly.

"Gosh," the girl said, "where do you think you are?"

"I don't know." Fleetwood said and attempted what he hoped was the sort of glance that pleads understanding. "I mean to say . . ."

"Are you being funny about a cup of coffee, or do you really think you're in a bar somewhere?"

"Coffee?" Fleetwood said. He seized upon the word as a drowning man might snatch at a drifting life preserver. Besides, it dinged a small bell of recognition somewhere in the back of his mind. "Yes," he murmured, "coffee, please."

"Okay, then," the girl said, and left.

Fleetwood reflected on this exchange in a thickening mood of perturbation. Retracing, haltingly, its tangled bypaths, it seemed to lack in retrospect those bright glimmerings of reason that one looks for in

a friendly conversation. The end result appeared to be that he was merely about to receive coffee, which his confused faculties identified only as something murky and brown, of undetermined usefulness. He had hoped for more. As he thought on it, however, voices reached to his inner ear. The girls at the magazine racks had tuned up conversationally. Chit-chat was their medium, of the sort that, for all its lack of substance, takes on a certain penetration after a time. In the end, Fleetwood found himself slipping, no matter how unwillingly, into the role of the eavesdropper. As it was, though, he couldn't have selected a more illuminating moment in which to fall from grace.

"I've been following him for years," one of the girls said as Fleetwood dialed in full strength. "I watch for him every time he comes out."

"Fleetwood Cassidy?" the second girl responded. "Oh, sure. I'm always watching for him."

AT this exchange, the back of Fleetwood's neck could not have bristled more smartly had someone begun currying operations with a pair of spiked boots. He straightened rigidly on his stool, twitched significantly about the ears and nose and, in short, affected all the most usual aspects of a beagle alerted to the first whiff of a super-scented fox. Coming as it did in the exact moment of his greatest befuddlement, this overheard snatch of conversation had a telling effect. All at once it

posed questions, suggested half-answers and plunged him headlong into a whole new field of bewildering conjecture. It all came too suddenly, however, for him to know how to react to it. For a moment he simply froze to his stool and stared straight ahead like a hypnotized hen.

It was this reactional delay, then, which bogged him down at the decisive moment. By the time he jarred himself into action and twisted around on the stool, the girls had already moved away. One of them, in fact, was well along in the act of handing over the cash for a copy of the *Saturday Morning Call* to the cashier by the door.

"Hey!" Fleetwood said weakly. "Here, there . . . !"

But time had drained out. The girl completed her transaction with the cashier, joined her friend at the door, and the two of them legged it in unison out to the sidewalk and into the burgeoning sunset. By the time Fleetwood had reached the doorway they had lost themselves in the crowd.

"Hey," Fleetwood murmured with limp regret and turned back to find that the girl had returned to the counter and placed a steaming cup at his place. She was watching him with worried interest.

"You want this joe, don't you?" she asked as he returned.

"Yes," Fleetwood said, settling himself and gazing dully into the cup. "Yes, I want it." He lifted the cup and sampled the coffee which suddenly tasted quite familiar to

him. But the greater part of his mind was concerned with other things. He looked up at the waitress who was still standing before him.

"I wonder," he said, "did you notice those two young women who were just here? The ones standing there at the magazine racks?"

The girl inclined her head thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded.

"Clare and Connie?" she said.

"You know them?"

"Uh-huh. Sort of."

"Who are they?"

"Who *are* they? Clare and Connie?"

"Yes. What about them?"

"Well, that's their names, Clare and Connie," the girl said. "That's all I know."

"But what do they do?" Fleetwood said, trying it another way. "Have you ever heard?"

"Oh," the girl said. "They're telephone operators. They come in here all the time."

"Telephone operators?" Fleetwood did his best to digest this patently indigestible piece of information. No matter how he chewed it it still didn't fit with what had just happened. He drummed his fingers on the counter for a moment. "Are you sure you couldn't be mistaken?" he asked. "It couldn't be that maybe they work for some sort of investigator or the government, could it?"

"Oh, no," the girl said positively. "Why should they do that?"

"Well," Fleetwood said, watching her closely, "I overheard them talking just now, and they were saying

something about following someone called Fleetwood Cassidy."

"Oh, sure," the girl said and smiled in a way that didn't in the least degree mar her expression of profound placidity. "Everyone follows him."

Fleetwood gaped. "Huh?" he said.

"Uh-huh," the girl said. "The *Call* . . ."

She broke off as an elderly man hailed her from the other end of the counter. "Hey, Kitty," he pleaded. "I haven't got all night, you know."

"Sure, Max," Kitty answered amiably, and departed.

"Wait!" Fleetwood said, but she didn't turn back.

FLEETWOOD furrowed his brow and pondered her last words. The call . . . she had said. The call. The call of what? The call *to* what, for that matter. Then it struck him like a coarsely threaded bolt flung out of the blue.

The *Call*! Of course! The *Saturday Morning Call*! The very magazine which one of the girls, Clare or Connie, had bought and tucked so conspicuously under her arm on leaving the store. Fleetwood's mind raced. It was perfectly plain, cut and dried like an apricot in season. The *Call* was the signal, the emblem of some secret society or organization which, for their own sinister purposes, was keeping tabs on him. The members made themselves known and communicated with each other through displaying the *Call* under their arms. But why? It was absurd;

by his very profession he was supposed to be a watcher, not a watchee.

As he pondered this latest and newest equation he turned his gaze automatically to the magazine racks and the several issues of the *Call* which were on display there. He looked, and fell back aghast, unable to believe his eyes. But there it was nonetheless, in spite of his disbelief:

**BEGINNING IN THIS ISSUE!**  
the banner across the cover gasped breathlessly, **FLEETWOOD CASSIDY AND THE KIPPERED CAPER!**

As well he might, after taking this in, Fleetwood went limp on his stool, washed through with conflicting emotions. It was plain that either he or the world had lost all sanity. He closed his eyes and commanded his head to stop reeling. Even so, it was some moments before he regained sufficient composure to reopen his eyes and bend down to take up one of the magazines for a closer inspection. And when he did, it rattled and flapped about in his grip like a struggling egret in a blizzard.

He maneuvered the magazine to the counter and eased an elbow onto it to hold it still. He gazed at it hollowly for some moments before, taking his courage in his hands, he opened it and churned through it to the first page of **THE KIPPERED CAPER**.

He stared in silent wonder. There, rendered in natural tints, staring back at him with all the sweep and grandeur purchaseable from the hand of a top flight commercial artist, was

his own face.

"Awrrr!" said Fleetwood. "Uphh!" And for the moment that comprised his entire comment on the discovery.

Time lost all meaning to Fleetwood. For all he knew whole hours might have slipped by as he sat there staring down at the illustration. There was one thing, though, about which he was positive; he had never posed for the portrait in the magazine. But then how could they have gotten such an exact likeness? And there was his name too. Something more than weird coincidence was involved here, he was certain of it. He started violently as the voice sounded in his ear.

"More coffee?"

The girl Kitty was standing before him again, the *Silex* poised expertly over his cup. Fleetwood stared up at her with haunted eyes. His mouth worked loosely for several moments before he produced intelligible sound.

"L - look!" he said, twisting the magazine around in her direction. "Look at that!"

Kitty put down the *Silex* and studied the picture with grave interest. "Seems familiar," she murmured. Then she made a quick clucking noise of recognition. "Of course! That's Fleetwood Cassidy, the fellow in the story. But just for a moment it looked like somebody else I've seen around . . ." She looked up at Fleetwood. "It's you, isn't it? You pose for Fleetwood Cassidy!"

"No," Fleetwood said despairingly. "That's just the trouble. I don't



pose for Fleetwood Cassidy. I've never heard of Fleetwood Cassidy. I mean I *am* Fleetwood Cassidy. Anyway . . ."

**B**UT Kitty's attention had already gone back to the illustration. "I always thought this fellow, Grant Dermitt, just made you up out of his head. You a good friend of his?"

"Grant Dermitt?" Fleetwood asked. "Who's he?"

"The guy who writes about you," Kitty said. "Oh, you know; you're kidding me." She smiled down at the illustration, unaware that just beyond her nose its flesh-and-blood counterpart had become distorted with a look of slack-mouthed stupefaction. "Just listen here to what it says about you." She began to read from the page opposite the illustration:

*Fleetwood shoved Caroline away from him, and she plumped down on the sofa like a mail bag heaved off a passing train, soft and sullen.*

*"Save it for the next sucker," he drawled. "When I'm ready to go shopping for coffins I'll let you know. But I'm not ready, not just yet."*

*Her face became a white mask of anger. "I'll kill you, Cassidy!" she shrilled. "You can't push me around and not bleed for it sooner or later. I'll kill you, damn you!"*

*"You'll try," Fleetwood nodded with a wry smile. "But take a tip, sugar, when you come gunning for me don't wear that negligee. It doesn't give you any place to hide the weapon. In fact it doesn't give you*

*any place to hide anything."*

*When he sauntered out the door she was still staring at him, her face twisted and mottled in the firelight like an artist's paint rag.*

"Gosh!" Kitty said, looking up from the magazine. "Gee!"

But Fleetwood didn't hear her. Suddenly a lot of things were falling into place and it was like deciphering a coded letter only to find out that the message you'd been working so hard to unscramble was one telling you you'd never been born, that you were just a figment of your own imagination. He remembered the face in the firelight—and the negligee—and all the rest of it. But it wasn't a *real* memory. It was only the shadow of something that hadn't really happened at all, merely the phantom remembrance of a reverie or a dream.

**S**UDDENLY a dazed, trance-like expression clouded his eyes. He shoved himself away from the stool, turned and started toward the door.

"Hey!" Kitty yelled. "Hey, just a minute! You owe me ten cents!"

But Fleetwood continued to the door, stepped out to the sidewalk, and glanced purposefully down the row of parked cars . . .

"Just imagine!" Kitty breathed. "Just feature you being real!"

"No," Fleetwood murmured. "No." He looked up at her, beyond her, his eyes filled with a shocking realization. "No, I'm not real. I . . ."

**T**HE grey coupe ground to a stop in the drive and Fleetwood got out. As he rounded the shrubs he could see that there were lights on in the house. That was good; Evelyn was home. It was a nice layout, swank and beautiful but very refined, like Evelyn herself. He could hear the wash and roll of the ocean from somewhere beyond and below. He patted his pocket, felt the box, and legged it up the steps.

Maybe Evelyn wouldn't exactly fall in his arms—her good training would blow the whistle on that one—but maybe she'd lean in his direction a little, especially when she saw that the stones were still all there. He reached out and put his finger to the buzzer.

As he waited, a qualm crossed his mind, the ghost of something he couldn't quite remember. There was a dim, fleeting glimpse of another world, a world made up of a counter, the face of a girl, a magazine . . . But it wouldn't focus properly; his memory couldn't make the hurdle. The door opened and Evelyn Anders was standing before him.

"Fleetwood," she said. She held her hand out to him and smiled. "Please come in, won't you?"

Maybe it was something in those cool blue eyes of hers, or maybe it was just that the harsh light over the door made her look pale; he got the idea that behind her gracious manner there was a sharp edge of nervousness. He got it stronger as she released her hand and made one

of those small, miscellaneous gestures toward her hair.

"Hello, Ev," he said. "I know it's not manners to just drop in like this, but I've got something to show you."

She didn't answer as she moved aside to let him in. He stepped into the hallway and waited for her to close the door. As she did so, he took in the jade green dinner gown and reflected that it was the kind of yardage that gave you the idea but let you think you'd gotten it all by yourself. Evelyn had class with a soft "a," but it wasn't stuffy, not on her.

"My maid's off tonight," she said, putting her arm through his and leading him toward the living room. "You can talk freely."

She maneuvered him to the divan in front of the fireplace and managed it so that they sat down in graceful unison. She leaned back and suddenly the dinner dress had a neckline. The qualm flipped again on the surface of Fleetwood's mind, like a minnow breaking the mirrored calm of a mountain pool. He edged away from Evelyn. She was saying something, but suddenly her voice had a senseless, clattering sound.

"What?" he said desperately. "What are you saying?"

"... so I hope you have something nice to show me," she was saying as his senses suddenly cleared. "I could use a dash of something nice just now."

"Oh, yes," Fleetwood said and reached into his pocket. He took out

the ivory box and held it out to her.

"The case!" she said, and he noticed that her hand trembled as she took it. "Are they . . . are the stones all right?"

"They're all there," Fleetwood said and waited for the touch, the glance that he had hoped would be his reward. "You may jump a little, though, when I tell you where I got them."

"Oh?" she murmured. Her gaze remained fixed on the box and its contents.

"Mario," Fleetwood said. "He lifted them the night of the killing." He sat back and waited.

There wasn't a touch or a glance. There wasn't even a flicker of surprise. He should have gotten it straight right there, but it wasn't until she turned and glanced back over her shoulder that he really tumbled. He jumped up, but Mario was already in the doorway. The gun in Mario's hand was only the companion piece to the cold ruthlessness in his eyes.

Evelyn got up from the divan and faded back into the shadows beside the fireplace. She still had class, cowering there in the dimness, but you could sound the "a" through your nose.

"So that's how things match up," Fleetwood said. He turned away from Mario and stared at Evelyn, a dumb move, the kind of thing a guy does when he finds out that the angel in his life got her halo from the local tinsmith. "You're wasting yourself, Ev," he said softly. "You

didn't have to team up with a rotten slob like that, not a gal like you. It's like putting platinum buttons on a suit of flannel drawers—"

HE stopped short and swung about. It was more than a qualm this time; it was a full-blown mental flip-flop. What the hell was he thinking about, turning his back on a guy with a loaded gun in his hand? Maybe it was romantic as the devil to stand around orating to a beautiful woman on manners and morals in the face of death and destruction but it certainly wasn't good sense. And now that he came to think of it, what in heaven's name was he doing in a preposterous situation like this anyway? Whatever was going on it certainly couldn't be allowed to go any further.

"Now, look, fella," he said soothingly, turning back to Mario, "let's cut out all this nonsense before someone gets hurt."

Mario came toward him, his putty face impassive. Evelyn started from the shadows.

"You're not going to kill him?" she cried. "Mario!"

"No, Mario! Fleetwood said with a feeling of complete madness. "No. You musn't get yourself worked up like this!"

"Shut up!" Mario snapped. "Maybe you gave out the invitations, honey, but it's still my party."

"You said you wouldn't!" Evelyn said. "You promised, Mario!"

"Yes, Mario," Fleetwood murmured worriedly, staring at the gun,

"you promised."

"How stupid can you broads get?" Mario sneered. "You think I'm going to let him talk?"

"No, Mario! No!"

"She's right, Mario," Fleetwood said, nodding in vigorous accord. "You should listen to her. Besides I won't talk. I wouldn't even know what to say."

"Turn around, Rover Boy," Mario said, motioning with his gun.

Fleetwood fully realized by now that he couldn't possibly make himself heard to them, but the situation demanded at least a try. He turned to Evelyn. "Talk to him," he urged. "Do something. Call the police!"

"Mario!" Evelyn cried, and covered her face with her hands. "Not here! Please don't do it here!" She began to cry hysterically.

There was a pause, then a grunt from Mario that might have meant anything. A battalion of ants began to crawl up and down Fleetwood's spine. Mario's plodding footsteps sounded directly behind him. He tensed against whatever was about to happen. Then, in a rush, a small whirring sound descended swiftly behind his ear and his head split with pain. The floor opened into a black abyss in front of him and he plunged toward it headfirst.

IN the same moment, the counter, the girl, the magazine, and the world that contained them became blindingly vivid and real. His mind suddenly cleared and he picked himself up from the floor in a mood of

fretful indignation.

Of course he hadn't dropped into any black abyss of unconsciousness; he'd merely stumbled and fallen from sheer nervousness. And a damned thick bit of business it was too. It made you look like a fool. As a matter of fact, now that he had a moment to collect his thoughts, he'd had quite enough of this prosey nonsense and he was fully prepared to assert himself against it. He got up, brushed himself off with careful deliberation, and turned defiantly to his companions.

"Look, you two," he said firmly, "I'm sick and tired of this childish sketch, and it's about time you knew it. You can go on with all the melodramatic clap-trap you like, but for my part I'm . . ."

The rest of it jammed up tight in his throat.

The two were not listening; in fact they were no longer in any condition to listen, even if they wanted to. They stood frozen, transfixed in positions of action—and jarringly two-dimensional! They were precisely like life-sized cardboard cut-outs of themselves. They stood, supported by heaven only knew what means, staring at the spot where he had fallen.

But that wasn't the worst of it. They were incomplete representations of themselves into the bargain. Neither of them had mouths; the woman's face was simply a sketched outline, Mario's a drawing of an irregular lump of putty. Fleetwood stared at them; he didn't know what

he had expected—perhaps that they would be transformed like himself. The last piece of the puzzle fell into place. He looked about.

The room had become a vague, unreal area in time, containing only a fireplace, a divan and two doorways. Looking on its clouded grey confines, he felt himself hovering crazily between fact and fancy. But this time he wasn't puzzled or frightened by the sensation. Turning, he forced himself to move against the room and away from it, out of the house. It was hard to make progress in a world where space and distance stretched and contracted in alternate convulsions, where substance did not exist upon which to gain a footing . . .

**“WELL**, for Pete's sake!” Kitty sputtered. “So you came back!”

Fleetwood glanced up and shook his head. She was gazing at him from across the counter.

“Uh-huh,” he said vaguely.

“Well, you still owe me ten cents.” She held out her hand. “The way you pop in and out of here like you were magic, I'm not taking any more chances. Pay up.”

Fleetwood fished about in his pocket and, much to his own surprise, withdrew a coin. He held it out for Kitty's critical inspection.

“Four bits,” she said. “I'll bring you your change.” She went to the cash register and, after the necessary manipulations, returned with three smaller coins. “I had you fig-

ured for a deadbeat,” she said. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay Kitty,” Fleetwood said.

“Kitty?” she said, then shrugged.

“Well, okay, I guess.”

Fleetwood gazed at her absently, his mind on other things for a moment.

“What's the matter?” Kitty asked. “You look worried. You looked kind of dopey before, but now you look worried too.”

“This Grant Dermitt,” Fleetwood said. “What do you know about him?”

“Grant Dermitt?” Kitty said.

“The fellow who writes about me. You know.”

“Oh, yeah. Grant Dermitt. What about him?”

“That's what I want to know,” Fleetwood said. “What about him?”

“I don't know why I enjoy talking to you,” Kitty said. “It never gets us anywhere. What do you want to know about this Grant Dermitt? Not that I can tell you anyway.”

“I want to see him,” Fleetwood said. “I have to get in touch with him.”

“Why don't you call him up on the telephone? He lives somewhere here in town. I heard at the Towers. What do you have to see him about?”

“I really don't know,” Fleetwood said, “not for sure.”

“You're funny,” Kitty said.

“Yeah, I guess I am,” Fleetwood reflected. He left the counter and crossed to the phone booths. Picking up the directory he turned to

the T's. He looked back at Kitty.

"You can bring me some coffee, if you want."

"Okay," she nodded and departed in the direction of the urns.

**F**INDING the listing for the Towers, Fleetwood turned to the telephone and reached toward it. Then he checked himself. He left the booth and returned to the counter where Kitty and the coffee were waiting for him.

"Find your number?" Kitty asked.

"Uh-huh." He nodded and stared down into the brown liquid in the cup. "Yeah."

"Aren't you going to call?"

"Yeah. Only all of a sudden I feel funny about it. It's something I've got to do, only I don't know just how to do it, to make it come out right. It's awfully important." He looked up at her quite suddenly. "Do you like me, Kitty?"

She smiled with slow confusion. "Sure. I like lots of people."

"No," Fleetwood said, shaking his head. "That's not what I mean. Do you *like* me?"

Her gaze moved thoughtfully over his face. "You're funny, like I said," she murmured. "You act—well, kind of daffy. And your ears stick out. But . . ." She nodded with sudden decision. "Sure, I like you, Fleetwood. I like you fine."

Fleetwood grinned at her and realized by the strangeness of it that he was enjoying the sensation for the first time in his life. It was

nice to grin at someone. And all at once he knew quite certainly what he had to do—and that it was the right thing to do. He spun around on the stool and started away. Then he stopped and turned back for a moment.

"I like you too, Kitty," he said and went into the phone booth.

"Well, for Pete's sake!" Kitty said and turned and looked at herself unbelievably in the mirror behind the register. "Gee whiz!"

The Towers was apparently the sort of establishment which believes in bending every effort to prevent the telephone and the English language from going any further than they have to as a means of communication.

"And who shall I say is calling?" the supercilious voice of the Towers enquired.

"Fleetwood Cassidy," Fleetwood told the Towers. "*Mr.* Fleetwood Cassidy."

"Very well, Mr. Cassidy, just one mo . . . Did you say *Fleetwood* Cassidy?"

"I did," Fleetwood said. "And tell Mr. Dermitt it's a matter of life and death."

"I see," the Towers mused with modulated forbearance, "it's a little joke, eh? Who shall we say is *really* calling?"

"Never mind," Fleetwood said. "Just say it's a friend on a matter of extreme urgency. Snap into it."

"Oh, very well," the Towers said, plainly piqued, "if you insist."

A silence followed, punctuated by several non-committal clicks and an intermittent buzzing. Finally the voice of the Towers resumed.

"Mr. Dermitt will speak to you, sir," it announced regretfully. "Please hold on while he changes instruments."

There was a final click and the voice of the Towers was supplanted by the voice of Grant Dermitt. It expressed an even blend of harrassment and vexation.

"Now, look here, Paul," it said, getting right down to brass tacks, "this isn't the time for you to be calling up with your bum jokes, telling the clerk you're Fleetwood Cassidy. I'm in a jam with this yarn and I haven't got time to be cute. Now, what's on your mind?"

"I don't know Paul," Fleetwood said, "so I'm in no position to speak for him. But I'll be very happy to tell you what's on my mind. And that's plenty. In fact I'm only calling to warn you I'm on my way over to tell you about it right now."

"What?" Grant Dermitt said. "Who is this anyway?"

"Fleetwood Cassidy," Fleetwood said, "that's who. And don't tell me I can't be, because I am."

"Now, just a minute," Grant Dermitt broke in. "Whoever you are, you've got a lousy sense of humor. And if you've got anything important to say, which I dismiss as a serious possibility, you'd better get on with it before I hang up, which I am just about to do."

"Okay," Fleetwood said. "I'll run

over the facts, touching lightly on the high spots. We'll shoot in the details later when I see you. My name is Fleetwood Cassidy. I'm six feet tall, have red hair, grey-green eyes and ears that noticeably protrude. I've been going through a lot of damnfool nonsense for quite some time because of you and I'm fed up to the teeth with it. I'd like to see you in order to turn in my resignation in person, but if you prefer, I'll be just as pleased to send it to you through the mails. If you don't believe . . ."

"You're crazy," Dermitt interrupted. "I'm hanging up."

"Just a minute," Fleetwood said firmly. "There's more and it gets more interesting as it goes along. I've just come from being deceived by a woman named Evelyn who has class, alternately pronounced with a hard and soft 'a', slugged behind the ear by a putty-faced gunman named Mario and pitched headfirst into a black abyss. But I decided the whole sequence was too corny, so I got up off the floor, dusted myself off and called you up just to say hello. Does any of that ring a bell with you, Dermitt?"

"What!" Dermitt yelled. "How do you know about all that? You couldn't . . . Why, I just this minute . . . Who are you?"

"Fleetwood Cassidy," Fleetwood said blandly. "Do I come over and see you?"

There was a sputtering sound at the other end of the line, then a wash of confused silence.

"Do I?" Fleetwood persisted.

"Y-yes," Dermitt said in a greatly reduced tone of voice. "I guess so." There was another beat of silence, then a spate of false laughter. "Of course I still think this is all just a gag."

"Sure," Fleetwood said, "you'll be sick with laughter."

**G**RANT Dermitt lived on the ninth floor of the Towers, where, as Fleetwood observed, the swank began in the foyer and increased, from floor to floor, as you went up. The brocaded elevator attendant glided in for a smooth landing, slid back the doors and confided in muted tones that Mr. Dermitt's digs lay due north and could best be reached by taking a steady heading in that direction. Fleetwood nodded with thanks and proceeded on schedule and according to plan.

He presented himself at the door marked 9-B and pressed the buzzer, not, however without a pause first for a deep meditative breath. There was no question in his mind that his next step, the one that would take him across Mr. Grant Dermitt's door-sill, would be the most decisive in his entire life. He poised himself, therefore, in an appropriate attitude of semi-military vigilance and waited for the encounter to take place.

There was hardly any lapse between the sound of the buzzer inside the apartment and the echo of rapidly approaching footsteps. The footsteps, however, for all their orderly progression, stopped abruptly

just short of the inner side of the door. In the pause that followed, Fleetwood reflected with understanding sympathy that he was not alone in the need to brace himself against the impending interview, and he found courage in this fact. Then the door opened and zero hour had arrived.

Never had Fleetwood seen a larger, blacker pair of spectacles, nor indeed had he even suspected that there was such a pair in existence. In fact it was not until he had recovered from the shock of these spectacular glasses that he was able to give their wearer so much as a thought. It was only then that he came to the decision that perhaps it wasn't so much that the glasses were large but that Grant Dermitt was small.

Dermitt could not have been over five and a half feet tall, and his head was large and flat on top so as to give him an odd, hammered-down appearance. Though he was obviously somewhere in the mid-thirties, his face had retained the alarming pinkness of adolescence. Through his glasses he peered up at Fleetwood with a sort of thoughtful horror.

"Oof!" he said by way of greeting. "Uhhhh!"

Fleetwood understood perfectly; it was probably quite a shock to the little fellow. He nodded in affable reply and filtered through the door into the entry.

As his host finally managed to rattle the door into a closed position, he made his way into the living



room which was straight ahead. A wall of glass, to the left, afforded an unbroken and dramatic view of the city. The furniture was functionally modern, and to the right was a sort of alcove containing a desk, typewriter and three file cabinets. The over-all effect was very glittering, very urbane.

"You've got a nice lay-out here," Fleetwood commented chattily.

QUIVERING visibly in the doorway, his host, however, was in no frame of mind for conversational hanky-panky about interior decoration.

"You . . . I!" he erupted. "You are!"

"Of course," Fleetwood nodded. "I told you I was, didn't I?"

"But you can't be!"

"I had a hunch you were going to say that," Fleetwood said.

"Oh, my word!" Grant Dermitt made his way to the nearest chair and plumped himself down into it. "My word!" he repeated. He stared at Fleetwood lengthily, plainly engaged in an inward struggle with his own senses. "But it's only a resemblance," he said finally. "That's all it *could* be, just a fantastic coincidence." His gaze entreated Fleetwood. "Isn't it?"

Fleetwood shook his head and settled himself comfortably into the chair opposite. "Shall I tell you the plot of your present story?" he drawled. "Or would the experience be too painful?"

"Oh, dear!" Grant Dermitt said,

making a small random gesture with his hand. "There is that, too, isn't there? No one could have known those things you told me on the telephone . . ."

"No one but me," Fleetwood said. "And who would know them better?"

"I simply don't know what to make of it," Dermitt moaned. "It's too crazy to believe, but . . ." He looked up at Fleetwood. "When did this happen?"

Fleetwood told him of the qualms, the spells, the small awakenings which had culminated in the final, major one that evening.

"I see," Dermitt said when he had finished. "In a way it begins to make sense. It checks with all the trouble you've been giving me lately."

"I've been giving *you* trouble!" Fleetwood said self-righteously. "What about the trouble you've been giving me? And not just lately. To date, under your gentle auspices, I have sustained twelve broken noses, seventeen crushed ribs, nine bullet wounds in the shoulders—five right, four left—three skull fractures and a sprained thumb. As for the black eyes, superficial lacerations, burns and random bruises, we'll just pass those by as too numerous and picayune to inventory at this time. However—and I wish to make this abundantly clear—I'm stuffed to the glottis with the whole muggy business. In fact, to be perfectly honest with you, Dermitt, my nerves won't stand any more of it. You can't imagine how it shakes

me to face a loaded gun anymore, let alone turn my back on one, as you had me do this evening. If I should ever have to repeat such a performance I wouldn't be a bit surprised if I broke down and had a severe attack of the vapors. You may call me a sissy if you like, but the wear and tear on my nervous system is beginning to tell in my emotional reactions and I don't want any more of it."

"Yes," Dermitt said, momentarily overwhelmed. "I suppose I have been a little rough on you, but I . . ."

"**E**XACTLY," Fleetwood cut in. "And never a hint of any sort of compensation or old age retirement. Not that that's the main consideration. If you had made me into one of those gentleman, garden-party type detectives, that would be an entirely different matter. Those boys go to all the best places, rub elbows with the cream of society and live off the fat of the land. They have a chance to improve themselves socially and prosper in the bargain. But this other routine, this rowdiness and mucking about with the absolute scum of the earth—well, let me tell you, it takes it out of a man and puts nothing back in return. So you'll understand when I say I'm quitting and getting out."

"Quitting!" Dermitt half rose from his chair, his eyes large enough to almost fill the circles of his enormous glasses. "Do you mean you actually intend—"

"I do," Fleetwood nodded em-

phatically. "Now that I have the chance to get out of the thing and take up a real life for myself I mean to do so. I felt it was only fair, though, to look you up first and explain my reasons."

"But you can't!" Dermitt squeaked. "You're just a fictional character! You can't do that to me!" He swallowed excitedly, held out a hand of supplication. "I didn't mean to be so hard on you, Cassidy. Believe me, if I had only known . . ."

"I know," Fleetwood said. "And I don't bear any grudges. As far as that goes I'm exceedingly grateful to you in a way. After all, if it weren't for you I might never have seen the light of day at all. In fact, if you don't mind, there are moments when I'm somewhat inclined to regard you in much the same way as a son might regard his father."

"Oh, my God, no!" Dermitt exploded, leaving his chair entirely. "This is madness! It can't be happening, it simply can't!" He whirled about suddenly and fixed Fleetwood with an anguished eye. "Who sent you here to do this to me?"

"No one," Fleetwood said. "I just came. You've got to believe . . ."

"This is a gag—a trick!"

"Oh, hell," Fleetwood sighed dejectedly, "now we're right back where we started."

"You'd better tell me who sent you," Dermitt said shakily. "You've got to, because I can't stand any more of it!"

"My view exactly," Fleetwood

put in gently.

"I'll go crazy! I'll go to pieces right here in front of you! I'll shatter like a crystal! Would you like that?"

"No," Fleetwood said. "Doesn't sound pleasant at all." He looked at Dermitt with speculation. "Do you mean you actually could disintegrate right here at my feet? Is it really possible for people to do that sort of thing?"

"Oh, Lord!" Dermitt shrieked. "Tell me who sent you. Please, please!"

"I really don't know what to say," Fleetwood sympathized. "I'd love to tell you this is only a joke, since it seems to mean so much to you, but I honestly can't. I'm strapped by the facts, if you see what I mean."

FLEETWOOD'S tone seemed to soothe Dermitt a trifle, for he returned to his chair and fell limply into it. For a space, he sat staring down at the carpet in a markedly haunted way, his hands twitching in his lap. Finally he looked up.

"I don't believe you," he murmured, and if he had anything more to say he was obviously quite beyond saying it for the moment. There was a prolonged silence in which Fleetwood became restive. He cleared his throat. Dermitt jumped.

"Look," Fleetwood said, seeing that any further negotiations were entirely up to him, "we've got to settle this business one way or the other. I want to get out of this fiction racket. In fact, I must. That's

why I came here. But, obviously, if I'm going to quit successfully you're going to have to extend a certain amount of cooperation. At least you're going to have to stop using me in your stories. Along those lines I can't see any possibility of an agreeable settlement until you are convinced beyond any doubt that I am actually me. I suppose I'm going to have to prove it to you."

Dermitt rallied a bit at this. "And you'll never do that," he said, "not to my satisfaction. I just won't believe it. I refuse."

"Maybe you will," Fleetwood said. "You'll have to help me, though, I'm afraid."

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see." Fleetwood paused for reflection. "Now, then, in that last scene you have me diving into a black abyss. That was the last bit of it, wasn't it?"

"... the floor opened into a black abyss in front of him," Dermitt quoted, "and he dived in headfirst."

"That's right," Fleetwood nodded. "What's the next line?"

"The next line?" Dermitt said. "How should I know? I haven't written it yet."

"But you must have some idea. Suppose you go over there to your desk and write it out right now — just as an experiment?"

"Huh? What are you up to?"

"Just try it and see what happens. I'd rather like to know myself as a matter of fact."

Keeping his eyes on Fleetwood, Dermitt got up slowly and crossed

to the desk in the alcove. "You're mad," he said uncertainly. "You're out of your mind."

"No," Fleetwood said with a wry smile. "I'm out of *your* mind. Besides, you dwell too much on insanity. That's morbid in a fellow your age." Dermitt said something under his breath, but Fleetwood didn't hear it. "Now just sit down and write the next line as it comes to you. And watch me, too, while you do it. I think we may both learn something interesting."

DERMITT sighed deeply and seated himself before the typewriter. "Oh, well," he sighed, "what have I got to lose now?" His face however held the expression of a man who was on the verge of losing everything; he was whistling in the dark. He turned to the typewriter and pressed a trembling hand to his left temple.

"Just one line, though," Fleetwood cautioned him. "No more than that."

"The way I'm feeling," Dermitt muttered, "I'll be lucky to do that much." He lowered his uncertain fingers to the keys and began to type:

*Through the cushiony darkness that engulfed him, a voice called out to Fleetwood with metallic shrillness . . . (At the very first tap of the keys, Fleetwood felt himself falling into black unconsciousness. He smiled with satisfaction and let it happen.) . . . like a silver cord plucked by a skeletal hand.*

Fleetwood awoke slowly as the

keys stopped tapping and the room grew still. He was still seated in the chair. He stretched himself and glanced across at Dermitt, whose eyes were now even larger than his glasses. The little man, lost in sputtering inarticulation, merely pointed at Fleetwood.

"You . . . you . . . you!" he managed finally. "You *faded!* Right in front of my eyes, you vanished!" He quivered emotionally. "Oh, my God!" He boosted himself unsteadily away from the desk and out of the chair. He came tottering across the room toward Fleetwood. "What . . . what happened?"

Fleetwood shrugged. "It's perfectly plain, isn't it? You transferred me to paper."

"Then you *are!*"

Fleetwood spread his hands significantly.

DERMITT moved back to the chair and executed another collapse. It is not likely that the stock crash of '29 could have produced a more vivid picture of the Ruined Man. His arms hung slack at his sides.

"No wonder the story's been going so badly lately," he groaned. "No wonder you haven't been consistent in print." He looked up slowly. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing special," Fleetwood said. "Live a little, I suppose. I haven't made any definite plans yet. Maybe I'll just do something quiet, like raising flowers."

"You mean—like you said—

you're just walking out on me?"

Fleetwood nodded. "But I'd really prefer it if you wouldn't look at it just that way."

"But you can't, Cassidy, you just can't. Not just now anyway. I need you. I've got to finish that story. I've got to have the money from it. I'm up to my ears in bills and obligations. I can show you if you don't believe me . . . My—our last one, The Kipperd Caper, is going awfully well on reactions and they've already promised me a better price on this one . . ."

"I'm sorry," Fleetwood said, "really I am."

"But you *can't*!" Suddenly he stopped, and a look of inspired shrewdness came into his cherubic features. Magnified by his enormous glasses, the new light in his eyes was hard to miss. Fleetwood didn't like the look of it.

"I won't let you," Dermitt went on in a much calmer tone. "I'll put you on paper, and you'll have to stay there until I'm done with you. You can't dictate to me. I'll write night and day. I'll take pills to keep me awake, and . . ."

"I was afraid you might take this tack," Fleetwood said. "But it won't work. As you've said yourself, you've been having all sorts of trouble with me lately. That means I've developed a will of my own, even on paper. If you shove me back into that story you're going to have more trouble than you ever dreamed of. You'll never get the story finished. I meant it sincerely when I said I

bear you no ill will, but you've got to remember I'm here to fight for my life."

"I see," Dermitt said, deflated. He leaned back, then sharply forward again. "Look, Cassidy, why can't we just make a friendly deal over this thing? There isn't much left to do on this yarn, hardly anything at all really. It's just a matter of finishing up. Why don't you stick it out with me until I'm finished? I'll never write about you again, I swear. I'll develop a whole new character." He looked to Fleetwood hopefully. "I'll pay you a regular salary, too, so much an hour—retroactive."

FLEETWOOD shook his head. "Huh-uh. I'm tired, Dermitt. If I have to mix it up with any more gunmen or double-dealing dames I'll have a nervous breakdown. I'm not kidding." His gaze moved to the window and the glittering vista stretching out into the eternal distance of the night. "Besides, I've met a girl . . ."

"A girl?" Dermitt said, incredulous. "How could you meet a girl? When did you have the chance?"

"This afternoon. In a drug store. But . . ."

"My God, you work fast, don't you? You didn't do anything unprintable, did you?"

"Of course not," Fleetwood said with sudden primness. "Besides, it's none of your business what I do outside of working hours."

Nonetheless, Dermitt pursued the

subject further. "What's she like?" he asked. "Limpid eyes, full of subtle invitation? Green flecked with gold?"

"I should say not," Fleetwood said, shuddering at the thought. "Kitty's eyes, as nearly as I can remember, are more mud colored. Flecked with sand, if they must be flecked with anything. They're astonishing."

"Huh?" Dermitt said, taken aback. "But I'll bet her mouth is something to wire home about, eh? Petulant and full? Soft and warm?"

Fleetwood shook his head. "Narrow as a string," he said reminiscently. "Hard and cool. Kitty is no ordinary girl, you understand."

"Are you sure she's any kind of girl at all?" Dermitt asked hesitantly. "What about her nose? She has a nose, hasn't she?"

"Of course," Fleetwood said. "Two openings at the end for air, of course. It's just a nose, I suppose, but she's got one all right."

"Uh-huh," Dermitt nodded with subdued spirits. "And hair?"

"She got that too," Fleetwood affirmed. "Lusterless, it is, and sort of brownish. I've never seen anyone like her. She's absolutely tremendous."

"Fat, too, huh?" Dermitt murmured, "on top of everything else." He shook his head regretfully.

"Oh, no," Fleetwood put in. "You misunderstand. Her figure, I should say, could be described as definitely so-so."

"Holy smoke!" Dermitt cried. "So that's the kind of dame you

pick out—you, Fleetwood Cassidy, who, thanks to me, has been in constant and close contact with some of the most fascinating females in fiction!"

"Oh, those tomatoes." Fleetwood sighed a jaded sigh. "I'm tired of all those sexy dames. They get so ordinary after a while. When you've seen one of them you've seen them all."

"Ordinary!" Dermitt said, outraged. "All of my women are unique artistic creations! And you're darned lucky to have been in the same stories with them. At least they . . ." He controlled himself with an effort and forced a smile. "But getting back to this—this Kitty of yours, what I had in mind was that maybe I could work her into the story too. God only knows how I'd do it, but what if I did? Then would you be willing to finish it out?"

FLEETWOOD sat up sharply. "No!" He fairly yelled it. "Emphatically no! You leave Kitty out of this. If you so much as put her name on paper I'll . . ."

Dermitt smiled with a certain formidable satisfaction. "You'll what?" he asked quietly. "I've been thinking how logical it is, that if I have the power to transform a fictional person into a live being, then I must also be able to reverse the process and make a live character into a fictional one."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"I might. And suppose I did? Suppose I transcribed Kitty to paper?

I might even change her a little while I'm doing it. Then you'd just about have to go back into the story, wouldn't you, if you ever wanted to see her again?"

"But . . ."

"But what, Mr. Cassidy?"

"You wouldn't, Dermitt," Fleetwood said limply. "You wouldn't."

Dermitt lifted his gaze noncommittally to the ceiling. "She might make an interesting character at that," he mused, "if I used her to the proper advantage." He yawned. "For laughs, that is, and contrast."

"Now, look, Dermitt," Fleetwood said anxiously. "I . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Cassidy?"

"You say there isn't much of this story left to do?"

"Just a bit, really."

"How long would it take?"

"That depends," Dermitt shrugged. "If everything goes smoothly, if I can depend on the full cooperation of my characters, it shouldn't take more than a day. Two days at the outside."

"I see," Fleetwood said. "And how much rough stuff will there be?"

"No more than usual. Maybe a kick or two in the groin. A flesh wound, naturally."

Fleetwood winced. "Is it absolutely necessary? Do I always have to get myself shot in the last chapter?"

"If the readers demand it, what can I do?"

"Obviously your readers are from an extremely low level of civilized society. I'm surprised that a bunch of savage, sadistic-minded brutes

like that know how to read."

"It's no good resorting to insults," Dermitt said mildly. "In fact, you had better mind your manners or this Kitty of yours is going to get the surprise of her pallid little life."

For a long moment Fleetwood was silent, weighing the alternatives. "Okay," he said finally, giving in to the inevitable. "Okay, you win. All I ask is that you get it over with as soon as possible."

"Fair enough," Dermitt said with satisfaction. "And I'm prepared to be reasonable about the thing, Cassidy. In fact I'm willing to go to work right now, if you like. All I ask, though, is that you subdue those cowardly impulses of yours until I'm finished." He got up, crossed to the desk and sat down before the typewriter.

**W**ATCHING with apprehension, Fleetwood stirred nervously and started to speak, but Dermitt motioned him to be quiet. The little man flexed his fingers, adjusted his monstrous glasses and regarded Fleetwood thoughtfully. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them with a nod of decision. He began to type.

A shudder of weakness passed through Fleetwood's long frame, and he tried to cry out, but suddenly his voice was only an echo of the clattering keys . . .

*Fleetwood stirred, and consciousness seeped into his mind like a cold, grey fog.*

*"Fleetwood!"*

A voice called to him with quiet urgency. He looked up and saw Evelyn's face blur into focus close above his own. Her arm was about his shoulders and she was pulling him toward her.

"The kiss of death?" Fleetwood said flatly.

"Don't" she whispered. "Please don't. I didn't know he was like that . . ."

"Where is he?"

It was a moment before she spoke, as though she needed time to make up her mind. "He's getting the car," she said. "He'll be back in a moment to take you with him. You've got to get out of here. I want you to."

Fleetwood glanced down at the gun beside her on the floor. "You're going to save me at gunpoint, huh?" he asked.

"He made me take it." She picked it up and held it out to him. "Here, you can have it if you want." She pressed it into his hand.

"How'd you get into all this?" he asked, sitting up. "You make a lousy gun moll. I'll bet you can't even smoke a cigar."

Her smile was bitter. "I needed money," she said. "Gambling debts, that sort of thing. It wouldn't be a new story, not to you. All I had were my jewels, and I didn't really have those; Blanchard took them for security. I had to get them from him. At first I figured I could get them easily enough, if I gave Blanchard the right story. I had it all worked out, and Blanchard always had a yen for me. Anyway, I was

going to have Mario sell them for me on the quiet, then I was going to pay Blanchard off and keep the rest for myself. I didn't want Blanchard to know I was all the way down to the bottom. Pride, I guess."

"But Mario was smarter than you." He said it flatly.

She nodded. "It was his idea to fake the robbery so we could collect the insurance money too. I think I agreed just to get out of facing Blanchard with a lie." She laughed harshly. "That's very funny, isn't it? Anyway, Mario was going to dispose of the jewels through a fence. All he wanted for his services, he said, was fifty percent of the final sale."

"He said," Fleetwood prompted.

AND even as he said it the thought flickered in the back of his mind that he was wasting an awful lot of valuable time jawing with this dame when he should be getting the hell out of there. He controlled the impulse. He thought of Kitty.

"Yes," Evelyn sighed. "Really he wanted everything. Me, too. But that doesn't matter any longer. You've got to get out of here." She got up and helped him to his feet. "You'll have to hurry."

He slipped the gun; it was as empty as a chorus girl's head. He looked up at Evelyn.

"I—I didn't know," she said stupidly. "Mario just handed it to me."

He grabbed her by the arm and spun her around before she could get away from him. "There's nothing



for winning like using a cold deck, is there, honey?" he snapped. He gave the arm a twist and her face registered pain. "Where is it? Where's the ammunition?"

"I don't know!" she cried. "Mario didn't . . ."

He pulled the arm up behind her and leaned down on it. The cords in her neck came out like harp strings. "Where'd you put it?"

"Over there!" she gasped, bending forward. "In the drawer of the cabinet."

He let her go and went to the cabinet. She hadn't lied. The slugs rolled forward as he pulled out the drawer. He scooped them up and fitted them into the gun. When he turned around she was still rubbing her arm, staring at him with frightened eyes.

"What are you going to do?" she whimpered.

"I'm not going to sneak out of here and let your boy friend shoot me down with this rod planted on me. Just how much would you be willing to bet this is the murder weapon the cops are looking for?"

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to trade with Mario when he gets tired waiting out there and comes back inside. Guns or bullet, baby, there's going to be a swap."

"No!" she cried. "No, Cassidy. No more killing." She moved close to him, swiftly, imploringly. "Mario's coming back for you. That's the truth. You must believe me, you

have a chance to get out of here with your life. Take it while you still have it. That's all that matters now. You're right about the gun; it's the one. I knew you'd find out sooner or later. That's why I wanted you to have it, to put an end to all this rottenness. Take it or leave it, it doesn't really matter so much, only get out of here before Mario gets back."

"Who're you really worried about?" Fleetwood asked. "Mario or me? Or do you know yourself?"

"Why should it matter so long as you stay alive? If you don't go you'll only be engraving your own tombstone. Mario won't give you a chance. He's probably got you spotted from outside right now."

IN all justice, Fleetwood's reaction to these words came quite by reflex. It was simply that his newly-awakened sense of survival had responded to the lady's admirable logic in the same quick manner of a coiled spring answering the touch of release. His reply leaped from his lips before he had time to properly weigh and consider.

"How do I get out of here?" he said.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, however, than he realized what he had done; the lady, Evelyn, stood before him an unreal, life-sized paper doll. Fleetwood permitted himself a cough of chagrin.

"Oops," he said mildly, then went on to qualify, addressing himself to the ceiling in the same way a simp-

ler soul might direct a conversation to the heavens. "I'm sorry, Dermitt, but after all, you did have to go and build up all that sticky suspense. And I warned you, you know, that my nerves aren't reliable."

He waited a space, not knowing quite what to expect. The silence grew and thickened. The room faded as before into hazy obscurity.

"Well," Fleetwood shrugged. "We tried, but I guess it's just no good, old man." He started toward the fuzzily outlined doorway. "No hard feelings, I hope."

Then suddenly he stopped as the room jolted back into sharp focus and the door opposite the one toward which he was moving swung open to permit the entrance of a girl in maid's regalia. She was a singularly undistinguished young woman both in face and figure. Her hair was sand-colored and her complexion was dull. Fleetwood started feverishly.

"Kitty!" he yelled.

Kitty appeared neither to notice nor to hear. She addressed herself to the restored Evelyn.

"*You rang, madam?*" she enquired nasally.

"*Yes, Kitty,*" Evelyn said. "*I need a drink dreadfully if you don't mind.*"

"*Yes, ma'm,*" Kitty said and turned away.

"Hello, Kitty," Fleetwood said tensely.

Though there was much in Kitty's glance as she passed Fleetwood she gave no sign that she had heard him.

Her eyes met his only with an expression of restrained disdain, much the sort that a sophisticated cat might bestow on a mechanical mouse which had snapped its spring. With a lift of her chin she left the room.

"Hey!" Fleetwood yelled. "Hey!" He addressed himself again to the ceiling. "Now, look here, Dermitt, you monster," he said, "you can't go doing this sort of thing. Besides, you're only ruining your own story; the dame already said the maid wasn't here tonight. You can't come running new characters into the thing now. It doesn't make sense!"

"*I don't know why I keep that dismal child around,*" Evelyn said flintily, quite unmindful of any interruption. "*For laughs, I suppose, or contrast. A bit of comic relief never hurt anyone.*"

FLEETWOOD ran to the doorway through which the aloof Kitty had disappeared and found himself in a hall. He caught a glimpse of her skirt as she passed from sight into a lighted room at the back of the house and took out in hot pursuit.

The room, when he got there, proved to be a kitchen, and Kitty was at the far end, busily transferring liquid by careful measure from a full bottle into an empty glass. Fleetwood approached her uncertainly. She finished her chores with the glass, then turned to him, apparently not at all surprised at seeing him there. She picked the glass up from the counter.

"*A drink, sir?*" she said, and

*forcibly and quite without warning flung the liquor into his face. "Get outa here and leave me alone, you flat-footed bum."*

"Kitty!" Fleetwood bubbled though the cascading bourbon. "Kitty, don't talk like that!"

"Out!" Kitty snarled, cinching her faded eyebrows a notch closer together. "Beat it, Sherlock!"

"Kitty," Fleetwood pleaded, "you don't understand. This isn't real, none of it. You don't belong here at all. It's Dermitt who's doing this to you, making you act this way. He's just trying to get even with me for messing up his continuity. You don't really hate me, Kitty, you like me. Think, Kitty, think hard. You said so."

*By this time Kitty had progressed to the cutlery drawer in a markedly purposeful manner and was in the act of withdrawing a carving knife, the blade of which gleamed in cold, brilliant concert with her angry eyes.*

*"Sorry you have to leave so abruptly, Mr. Cassidy," she said with lethal sweetness. "But we all have to go sometime, don't we?" She brandished the knife so that it cut the air with a menacing whoosh. "My kid brother had to, when you helped put him in the chair."*

Fleetwood saw the point, but only momentarily, for he was already on his way back to the hall and safety. Taking cover behind the frame of the door he peered around its edge.

"I forgive you, Kitty," he said

sadly. "I realize that this is none of your doing and I still hold the knowledge in my heart that you're really quite fond of me."

*"I'll cut your heart out, if you don't fade outa here," Kitty gritted back at him. "Scat!"*

Fleetwood scattered. But not in a mood of docile acquiescence. Fate had handled him quite nastily during the last several minutes and, therefore, deserved to be dealt with in kind. He addressed himself to Fate, using the surname.

"Dermitt," he said between clenched teeth, "now you've gone too far. Far, far too far. I told you to leave Kitty out of this. If you have trouble now you've only got yourself to blame. Remember that."

HE retraced his steps through the hallway and back into the living room, where he seated himself solidly on the divan. Favoring Evelyn, who was still in evidence, with the most perfunctory of glances, he folded his arms adamantly across his chest and crossed his legs.

"I refuse to make another move," he announced haughtily, "until both Kitty and I are released from this preposterous narrative. And you may take that as an ultimatum. I don't care if we're all left dangling by our participles until we rot like grapes on a vine." And with that he settled into an attitude of stolid resistance, breaking the silence only once more for a terse sign-off. "Besides," he added, "your writing smells like a large dead fish."

Stillness overlayed the room like a dense and redolent mist. Evelyn, still vividly defined, remained fixed in position like a figure in a wax-works tableau. A moment passed. Then it happened.

The room jolted, with the swift shock of a train compartment yanked forward by a sudden start from the engine. But that was all, just a jolt with an immediate settling. Evelyn moved slightly, but Fleetwood contained his surprise in a slight lift of the eyebrows. He knew without question that this somehow heralded a counter action from Dermitt, but he couldn't guess what it might be. He tensed himself determinedly against whatever might follow. It followed swiftly enough.

*Evelyn swung about, drawing her hand to her mouth.*

*"Mario!" she cried.*

*Mario, his mouth drawn down in a grim line, stood in the doorway, gun in hand.*

So that was Dermitt's maneuver, Fleetwood reflected complacently; he meant to push the action forward by sheer force of will.

"It won't do any good, Dermitt," he said. "I won't budge."

He glanced around, pleased to note that both the gun and Mario's murderous gaze were directed toward the place which he had deserted when he'd left the room to follow Kitty.

*"Move, Cassidy," Mario grunted. "Get goin' before you turn out to be a mess on the lady's rug."*

"Hah!" Fleetwood snorted unconcernedly. "Go on and shoot a hole

in the wall, you big imaginary fat-head. See if I care."

**B**UT even as he said it, the sensation came over him; it was the qualm in reverse, a subtle drain on his reserve of resistance. Dermitt retained more of a hold over him than he had believed. The terror of this sudden realization compelled his attention to such a degree that it was a moment before he realized that he had actually risen from the divan and was moving toward the spot that would place him directly in range of Mario's gun. With an almost superhuman effort he forced himself to stop.

"No," he panted. "No, Dermitt, you can't make me do it. I won't." He dragged himself heavily back toward the divan, as though struggling against a powerful wind. But after only a few steps he slowed, then stopped altogether, unable to move even an inch further. His will was stalemated against Dermitt's.

Then, quite suddenly and most surprisingly, he felt himself released. He fell forward, caught himself against the arm of the divan and swung around into it. He leaned back panting and waiting. Dermitt hadn't given up, he was sure of that; he had simply switched methods.

*"Drop that rod, sucker," Mario snarled. "It's empty." He laughed. "Boy, do you look silly, Cassidy. Drop it before I drop you."*

*"No!" Evelyn screamed. "It's loaded, Mario! He found out! Mar-*

io! Don't!"

Mario didn't even give her a glance on that one. "So's a fountain pen," he said. "Okay, Cassidy, this is the last time I'm tellin' you."

Fleetwood watched this interplay with careful interest. As silly as it seemed, possibly Dermitt meant to just go ahead with the thing without him. Then he knew better, as Kitty appeared from the hallway, crossed the room with somnambulistic precision and placed herself solidly in the projected line of fire. Fleetwood felt a new thrill of terror; Dermitt was using Kitty as a hostage. Either he would go ahead with the planned action and trade gunfire with Mario or Kitty was going to be killed.

He reached quickly into his pocket where he had put the gun. It wasn't there. Then he remembered that it naturally wouldn't be; he was out of the story and the weapon, being fictional, existed only in the story. The only way to return it to his possession was to enter into the action again. He cast off his moorings and leaped forward with a fleeting picture of Mario's finger closing in on the trigger.

The ensuing moments were characterized by a series of crashes which began in a quiet sort of way but rapidly mounted to a nerve-shredding climax. The first crash was really only a thud occasioned by a collision of bodies as Fleetwood threw himself against Kitty. The second instantly grew out of the first as Kitty toppled to the floor. The third was the natural result of

Mario's finger pressing down on the trigger. The rest of it, the screams and random dialogue, was lost to Fleetwood as hot pain licked through his hands and up his arm.

"You've hit him!" Evelyn screamed. "He's bleeding!"

"Just winged him," Mario growled. "He'll bleed a hell of a lot more than that before the night's out."

There was a clattering at Fleetwood's feet and he realized that he had let go of the gun without knowing it. He looked down at it. The blood dripping from the tips of his fingers was splashing against the barrel. That's what he got for letting a dame take his attention when he was on the spot. Business before pleasure, they always said. He'd have to remember that from now on—if he lived to remember anything.

"Fleetwood!"

THE scream jarred Fleetwood out of the stream of events which included Mario and Evelyn. He looked around and almost shouted for joy. Sitting on the floor, Kitty was staring up at him, her eyes wide with wonder.

"Where are we?" she asked frightenedly. "What's going on?"

It was miraculous! Apparently the recent violence had snapped her back into the realm of reality; after all she was not originally a fictional creation like the others. Smiling down at her, Fleetwood realized that the pain had gone from his hand, the wound had vanished; he too had escaped Dermitt's world of fiction

through Kitty's awareness. The action had been broken just enough. He looked about. The room had begun to fade, Mario and Evelyn were slipping out of dimension. Together, they could make it; two wills were stronger than one.

"Hurry!" Fleetwood said, helping her up. "We've got to get out of here while we've got the chance."

"But, what? . . ." Kitty murmured dazedly. "Who are those strange looking people?"

"Never mind them," Fleetwood said. "Just hurry." He hustled her along toward the doorway, around the frozen figure of Mario and out into the entry.

"I don't understand . . ." Kitty said.

Reaching the outer door Fleetwood grasped the knob and threw it open. Then he stopped, so abruptly that Kitty collided against him. Before them, blocking the way, stood a small, hammered-down looking man in enormous black-rimmed glasses. He was holding a gun in his hand which he advanced to Fleetwood's chest.

"Dermitt!" Fleetwood gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"Get back in there," Dermitt said grimly, wagging the gun.

"You can't do this, you two-bit hack," Fleetwood said. "You can't be in this story too."

"It's my story, isn't it?" Dermitt said nastily. "I can be in it if I want to. I wrote myself in just to be on hand to keep an eye on you."

"It's anybody's story by the looks

of it," Fleetwood said. "And you're just another inconsistent character. Of course you've already made such a hash of the thing I don't suppose it really matters."

"I'm Mario's henchman," Dermitt said firmly. "My name is Lester, and I'm here to help him handle you. And believe me, Cassidy, I'm already so sick of your interference I don't care much what happens to you. Now get back in there and do what I tell you."

A curious intensity emanating from behind the eccentric spectacles caused Fleetwood to give ground. He turned to Kitty to warn her to stay behind him. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words shriveled on his tongue as she met his gaze darkly, with a look of extreme loathing, then turned on her heel and marched back into the living room. Fleetwood whirled back to Dermitt.

"It's no use," Dermitt said smoothly, "she's back in character. And you'll follow her lead if you know what's good for you — and her."

Fleetwood turned and followed Kitty back into the center of the room, toward the divan.

"Kitty . . ." he said, but she gave no sign that she even heard him.

"Hi, Lester," Mario said. He was restored to dimension.

"Havin' a little trouble?" Dermitt said from the corner of his mouth. "I heard a shot."

"Boy, are you corny," Fleetwood

said spitefully. "You're all this stinker needed." Dermitt swiveled his gun in his direction.

*"He got a rod from the lady," Mario smiled. "I had to slap his wrist with a bullet to get him to let go."*

*"He won't act up any more," Dermitt said. "If he does he'll be a dead character."*

Across the room Fleetwood swung around in a paroxysm of pain and grabbed his wrist. Blood began to drip again from the ends of his fingers. At his feet lay the gun, just as before. He had slipped back again into Dermitt's pattern of action. The writer had tricked him with the sudden pain.

*"How about it, Cassidy?" Mario said. "You comin' outa here on your feet or by your heels? It doesn't matter a damn to me, you know."*

*"Okay," Fleetwood said. "Have it your way, Mario—for just a little while."*

*"For long enough," Lester snarled.*

Fleetwood started forward, but the struggle within his mind, the straining effort to focus his mind in the direction of reality, did not cease. The pain throbbing in his hand, however, interfered badly. He bit his lip hard to provide a counter irritant. He stopped; the pain disappeared.

"Now, dammit, Dermitt!" he said with final exasperation, "that doesn't even hold water, and you know it. Why would any guy in his right mind just shrug his shoulders and take off with a couple of murderous rats as calmly as though he were on

his way to the garden to pick lilacs? Any guy would give himself a last chance and make a break for it. How in the devil can you expect your readers to swallow swill like that? I wouldn't even . . ."

THERE was something in Dermitt's round face—a dangerous angry red—that warned him to stop. The little man was on the verge—perhaps beyond.

"So!" Dermitt exploded with a high scream. "You've not only ruined my story, now you're going to give me a lecture on writing! That does it absolutely, Cassidy, that's the end! I created you and, by God, I can destroy you too!"

As he spoke, he made fumbling preparations with his gun. "You'll never get out of this yarn alive! You'll die on paper just where you were born!" The glitter in his eyes, amplified by the glasses, was unmistakably that of a man who had snapped his bolt.

*"Did you ring, madam?" Kitty said suddenly, with idiotic unconcern.*

*Eve'yn turned in response to this incongruity and smiled warmly. Then she went limp against the back of the divan. "Eeeeeeeeee!" she screamed with shrill hysteria.*

*"Gotta gat . . . gotta gat . . . gotta gat . . . gotta gat . . . gotta gat." Mario began to chant, rolling his eyes insanely.*

*"Madam, did you ring, madam?" Kitty chimed in. "Madam? . . . Madam? . . . madam?"*

"Gotta gat," Mario said, grinning crookedly. He stepped back two paces with jerky rapidity and pointed his gun at the ceiling. "Gotcha covered, shamus."

These stunning proceedings, occurring as they did in overlapping rapidity, had a startling effect, even on Dermitt. He looked up from his gun distractedly.

"Did you ring, madam?" Kitty said, persisting with the same old refrain. "Ring-a-ling-a-ling, madam?"

Mario fired three shots into the ceiling in rapid succession. "Gotcha," he tittered. "Gotcha with my gat, yuh rat, yuh."

"Bless yuh," Evelyn said and moved away from the divan with a lighthearted pirouette that delivered her to the center of the room directly between Fleetwood and Dermitt.

"Oh, my God!" Dermitt wailed. It was plain that the little man was no less stunned than Fleetwood at these outcroppings of his own madness. Fact and fancy had gotten so snarled together that the result was roaring insanity. He shook his head as though to clear it.

"Why don't you shoot me, Mario?" Evelyn said, running her hand wildly through her hair. "Kill me, too, and be done with it. God knows it wouldn't be any great loss to the world after what I've done." She turned to Fleetwood in a convulsive movement. "Go, Cassidy, make a run for it. I'll shield you until he kills me. You can use my body to protect

yourself. Only promise you'll kill him—after he kills me. That's all I want now, just to die and know that he's going to die too." She smiled crookedly. "And when you check up on that gun you'll find out it's registered in my name. That's right, I killed Blanchard. I went to him to ask him for the jewels and he wouldn't let me have them. We got into a fight over them. It was an accident, I suppose. I don't really know how it happened—I just did it. I lost my head and ran and I had to send Mario back to get the jewels for me. He was the only man I knew filthy enough for that kind of job. And I was frightened half to death . . ." Her voice trailed off slowly. She sank to the floor like a discarded scrap of tissue paper.

IT was only then that Fleetwood noticed that Dermitt had renewed his intentions with the gun. With frenzied eyes he was sighting down the barrel. Fleetwood tried to control the churning sensation in his head. The distinction between reality and imagination was lost to him too. Where, he wondered frantically, did one begin and the other end?

"Okay, Cassidy," Dermitt gritted. "This is the finish. Period!"

"Ring-a-ling-a-ling, madam?" Kitty snickered, presenting herself in front of Fleetwood.

"Get out of the way, Kitty," Fleetwood said.

She looked around at him. "Oh, Fleetwood!" she smiled. "I like you so much." Then with a sudden frown,



as though remembering something unpleasant, she dealt him a stinging blow across the mouth and moved rapidly away.

"Period!" Dermitt screamed and curled his finger down over the trigger.

Fleetwood threw himself to the floor in conjunction with the explosion of the gun. It was close timing. The bullet thunked into the wall behind him. Whether it was by accident or some unconscious planning in his mind, his hand slapped down over the grip of the gun on the floor. All in one movement, he grasped the gun, rolled over and fired blind in Dermitt's direction. There was a scream of pain, a beat of silence, then a dull thud. Fleetwood jumped to his feet, holding the gun ready.

"Oh, my God!" Fleetwood gasped.

Across the room, huddled on the floor, Dermitt sat in a spattering of his own blood, clutching his stomach. Fleetwood ran to him.

"Dermitt!" he cried.

"I'm hit in the stomach," Dermitt groaned. "You've got to help me, Cassidy, you've got to!"

"Get out of the story!" Fleetwood said. "Get out of here before you die!"

"I can't. I can't move. Something's gone wrong with my legs."

"Let me help you up," Fleetwood said, slipping his hands quickly under Dermitt's arms. "I'll carry you."

"No!" Dermitt screamed. "No! I can't stand the pain!"

Fleetwood released him. "What can I do?" he asked helplessly.

"Oh, Lord!" Dermitt wailed. "Let me think, let me think!" His face contorted as a spasm passed through his body. Then he relaxed again and opened his eyes. "You get out," he said. "That's it. Get to the typewriter as fast as you can . . . re-write this . . . mark out the part where you shoot me . . . make it a miss . . . or a flesh wound . . . It's the only way. But hurry, for God's sake!"

"Okay," Fleetwood said. "I've got to get Kitty, though, and take her with me."

"No," Dermitt put in quickly. "Write her out, too, when you get there. It'll be faster. Hurry, Cassidy, hurry! I can't stand too much more of this."

"All right," Fleetwood said. He whirled about and ran for the door. He turned back once, just before leaving, to look at Kitty, but the room was already in a state of half-dissolve and she was only a dim, grey figure in the distance. He hurried outside.

As he ran forward into the swirling blackness ahead, the house quickly evaporated behind him . . .

HE didn't know how he had gotten back to Dermitt's Towers apartment. It seemed that he had been there all along. He was sitting in the same chair, as though he'd merely dozed there for a time. He shook his head to clear it. Then he remembered.

He turned and saw Dermitt slumped over his typewriter, his hands

clutched to his abdomen. Fleetwood frowned. So that was the way of it; the writer had managed to project himself into two separate dimensions simultaneously, a dangerous undertaking even for a sane man. Fleetwood shoved himself out of the chair and hurried to the alcove.

As he approached, Dermitt stirred weakly and opened his eyes and twisted them in his direction. There was no blood, no wound—no visible, physical wound — but still Dermitt was dying.

"Hurry!" he whispered. "I . . . I blacked out. I guess I went a little crazy for a while. Please save me."

Fleetwood took him under the arms, and, ignoring his moans of pain, half-dragged, half-carried him to the nearest chair. He eased him into the chair and turned back. Then he stopped and looked around at the little man again. He sucked in his breath with a start of surprise.

Dermitt was losing substance! He was actually fading away into a shadow of himself. The dying fictional projection was carrying away the physical one. The wound was too vital, too real to the writer for him to draw resistance from the fact of its fictional source. There wasn't much time.

"Hurry, Cassidy!" Dermitt mouthed soundlessly. "Hurry!"

Fleetwood pulled himself away from the spectacle of the fading bug-eyed little author who had forced him through volumes of abuse and harrassment, who had actually attempted to murder Kitty and him-

self. He ran to the typewriter.

He sat down and poised his hands over the keys. Then, with one last intense glance in Dermitt's direction, he began to type . . .

THE drug store sparkled from its cleaning of the night before. Morning sunshine, showing through the plate-glass windows, conspired with the indirect lighting to make the displays, the jars, the bottles, the paper clips and snake bite kits gleam like a rajah's ransom. Fleetwood perched himself on the stool at the end of the counter and leaned forward in an attitude of expectation. Presently he was rewarded.

"Fleetwood!" Kitty called, catching sight of him. She came swiftly to dock at the napkin holder in front of him. "I was hoping you'd show up today. I had the goofiest dream about you last night."

"I'll bet," Fleetwood said with a sigh of happy relief. Explanations weren't going to be necessary after all.

"I'd tell you about it," Kitty went on, "but every time I try to get it straight in my head everything just gets all mixed up. I was mad at you, I remember, but at the same time I didn't really want to be."

"That's good," Fleetwood said, "that you didn't want to be, I mean. Otherwise, you might have got up with a chip on your shoulder and you wouldn't go out to dinner with me tonight."

"Huh?" Kitty said. "Are you asking me?"

"That's what I came here for," Fleetwood nodded. "Will you go?"

"Oh, I'll go, all right," Kitty said. "I'll be ready from seven thirty on, any time you're ready. Gosh!" Her smile faded a bit. "You look awfully tired, though . . ."

"I'll have to get some rest," Fleetwood agreed. "I worked last night."

"All night, you mean?" Kitty asked. "But that reminds me, what do you do anyway? I should have asked you yesterday, I guess."

Fleetwood hesitated. Then, with a deep breath, he took the plunge. "I write," he told her. "Stories."

"No kidding? What kind?"

"Oh, mysteries," Fleetwood said with extreme offhandedness. "About a private detective, a little hammered-down looking guy with big glasses

who always gets into a lot of trouble. He gets kicked around and stepped on and shot up until the last chapter when he catches the murderer and they haul him off to the hospital. It's pretty rugged stuff."

"Gee," Kitty said solemnly, "the poor little guy. I feel sorry for him."

A small, private smile touched Fleetwood's lips. "Don't," he said. "After all, he's only a fictional character."

Then, with apparent irrelevance, his glance moved away took in the gleaming brightness of the morning, the store, the busy world outside. Finally he looked back at Kitty and grinned.

"Gosh!" he sighed ecstatically. "This is really living!"

THE END

## *Dianetic Fraud?*

NOW that the esoteric world of the dianetician has been with us for some time, it is interesting to examine the reaction of science to this new "science." And practically all of the popular and semi-scientific publications have commented upon the subject. Insofar as it is possible to digest numerous comments into one broad summary, this is what is said.

Much of what dianetics claims is true. In many instances it has a sound psychological basis. It has drawn heavily from conventional psychiatry and psycho-analysis. These are the positive values.

Unfortunately it has also drawn

from mysticism, folk-lore, pure personal opinion, and a host of pseudo-sciences. It is not at all documented. And above all, it relies for its success in impressing the dilettante in scientific matters by the use of a ridiculous jargon, a vocabulary of strange synthetic terms blended with serious expressions. It is a completely pompous mixture of truths, half-truths and falsehoods, unfortunately offering a sort of succor to those who should least go to this sort of thing for relief from their worries and anxieties.

Its notable success in every way is a sad commentary on the state of our civilization!

# THE VOID IS MY COFFIN

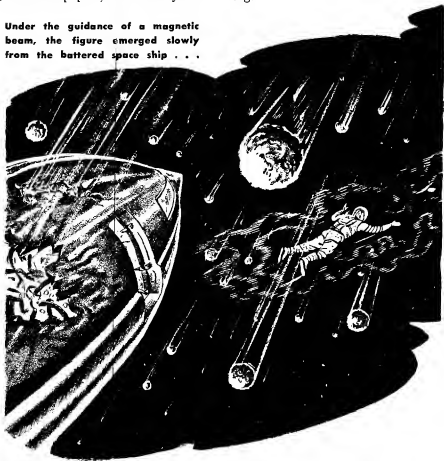
*by James Blish*

**I**N Engstrom's office one small desk lamp flouresced endlessly.

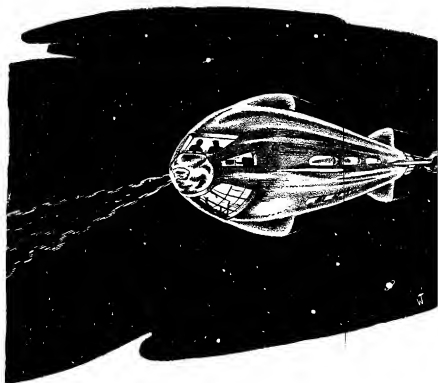
The man himself seemed to be asleep, his head nodding gently over scattered papers, but Barclay knew

that Engstrom seldom slept. Except for the message center twenty stories down, this was probably the only lighted room in the new building.

*Under the guidance of a magnetic beam, the figure emerged slowly from the battered space ship . . .*



**If a space pilot was caught in a meteor swarm it would take a miracle to bring him out alive—but miracles don't happen very often . . .**



Engstrom could not but see failure in every minute lost asleep. He was Coordinator of the Exodus; his job was to move a world. He lifted keen blue eyes to Barclay.

"Sir Christopher," he said, "here I am piled high with work that keeps me from my bed—and you're worrying me about some visionary legislation!"

"I'm sorry," Barclay said. "I've tried and tried to get to you during the day, but your secretaries turn me off. If I don't leave for Mars at dawn, I'll have to wait another year to get there — and this Act is absolutely necessary."

Engstrom waved tiredly. "Everything is necessary," he said, as if trying patiently to make a child

understand. "We are tiptoeing on the edge of extinction. We have about six million people alive in this hemisphere, perhaps another twenty million in Asia and Africa, about two million in Europe. Our air is slow poison, our lifespans are short, the veriest Congo pigmy is indispensable. Why should I bother about pilots' licenses now?"

Barclay felt a furious impotence at the phrase. "You owe me an audience," he said fiercely. "Jarvis Crane gave you the process which made Mars livable for us — but I gave you the easy way to get there. None of your organization means a thing unless we can leave Earth, leave the Dust behind, have our babies in clean air."

"True, true. The geotron was a great gift. We would not have saved many with rockets. Yet you propose to *stop* people leaving Earth!"

"For now, yes. There's no point in escaping early — the radiogens in our lungs go with us — we're leaving for the sake of our children, not for ourselves. And geotron flight is dangerously simple. Do you know what the newscasters are calling these years? 'The Bloody Sixties!' After this last slaughter, they're just getting around to calling the times bloody! And I'm the man who made suicide really inviting!"

"You're young, Barclay, and you talk nonsense," Engstrom said, his head beginning to nod again.

"I do not. All over the Earth, amateurs are setting out into space.

They're going in badly insulated, badly controlled, totally dangerous little ships. Some of them are even using Ehrenhafts. And they're dying like flies. They think that once they get away from the Earth, they'll escape the Dust; and if they die in flight, well, it's a quick death, not like cancer or panleukopenia."

He leaned forward, trying to drive the full force of his desperation across the impregnable desk. "They're wrong, Coordinator. All wrong. The Dust is in their bodies. Death in space isn't quick. Space-flight isn't easy. And we need them — we need their hands now, and their loins later. If the Exodus is to — "

"The Exodus," Engstrom said with the same tired patience, "is still half a dream. What do a few deaths in space matter? Let the panicky people panic, and die. There will be enough left behind to man the swarm survey and the Arks. With luck we should still have a colony of twenty-five millions on Mars by the time your 'Bloody Sixties' are over."

"The death toll this year," Barclay said bitterly, "is 48%. Next year, unless this Spaceways Act is passed, it will be higher. These deaths are murders on my hands; I made them possible; I designed the geotron. Already there's the saying that Jarvis Crane gave us life, and Christopher Barclay gave us death. Suppose one man had invented the fission-bomb all by himself? He'd be the most hated man

in history, and no mistake. I'm nominated, by God, and another year of this — "

Engstrom put his hands together in front of him, pushed papers away to one side and the other, and drew his palms back together again. "Young Barclay," he said, "use your head for something besides physics. It's true that 48% of the people who go out into space today die on the way. But how many people make the venture at all? Not more than 3% of the population a year. The problem you present is still in diapers."

Barclay said, "Every man and woman who dies in the spacelanes kills a healthy child we will need desperately on Mars — more desperately than we need its parents here. We're all dying. How soon we die is of no moment as far as manpower is concerned. But we need *stock*, Coordinator! We need the genes of these fools who are throwing themselves into space. So many of the births on Mars will be helpless mutations, and so many of the pregnancies will be stillborn, and so many of the conceptions will be negated by lethal genes — and so many people are sterile already!"

In the brief silence, Barclay knew that he had failed.

"Only fools die in space," Engstrom said. "Spaceflight is quite simple, thanks to you: a geotron ship almost flies itself. When I was younger, I flew powder kegs to the Moon and back, and thought Ehrenhafts the key to the universe. Now

my own son is following the orbit you will fly at dawn, and will be safe or Phobos; I have already sent his family to a new dome there as simply as one would fly a plane."

Engstrom unclasped his hands and sat back in his chair. "If some fools die, I am sorry. If you are blamed for their deaths, I think that unfair. But I cannot concern myself with your reputation. I have the death of a race to halt."

Barclay stood up, and stared for a moment in silence. Then he tossed the sheaf of papers into the pool of lamplight.

"I'm rejoining Jarvis Crane," he said. "We still have some more Martians to revive, and they're important, too. Maybe when I get back you'll have seen what I've been getting at. There's a copy of the Act, when you're ready for it."

"Thank you." Engstrom leafed through the pages of the folio, then sighed and slipped it into a drawer. He pressed a stud and the Y-Ray mirror lit.

"Wake up Leland and send me the African iridium files," he told the mirror. Barclay gritted his teeth and strode out.

**A**LONE in space, Barclay was not quite so sure of himself. The heart-filling beauty of the stars had always made him feel irrationally at peace with himself and the dying world; it gave him that totally false perspective which shallow people call stoic.

The deaths of a few desperate adventurers — and the race dying, unless the Exodus came off. A difference — to call it a “big” difference was ludicrous, the two kinds of death were in different universes.

Barclay's own job was almost as big. There were some thousands of Martians still in suspended animation in their deep crypts; Gregory Marshall, the berserker who had ridden a rocket to reach Mars first, had trodden over them for ten years without knowing they were there. Jarvis Crane and Barclay had discovered them, had set out to revive them, to give them the Crane treatment, to add their techniques and their familiarity with the Martian ecology to the coming Earth colony . . .

And surly spaceflight did seem to be a simple thing Barclay fingered the few controls before him, and the geotrons in the bowels of the ship deepened their abstracted, tuneless humming. The General Field theory, which Einstein had published just before the Bombing, had made the geotron possible, but Barclay had designed it — designed it so that a man need only know how to tell one heavenly body from another to cross space.

And yet 48% of the men who set forth into space in 1962 never came back. Their ships were poorly sealed, so that they suffocated or froze. They tried to pierce the dust blanket of Venus without Y-Ray equipment, or they stepped out into the warm Venusian “mist” and

got a lungful of formaldehyde. They turned off their geotrons to get an undistorted look at space, and were riddled by the meteoric grape-shot which stormed all about the inner planets. They careened into atmosphere at crazy speeds and went out in a streak of silver flame. They went a meter too far into the sunlight from Mercury's twilight zone, or on searches for a mythical Vulcan, and were fried. They sought private estates in the asteroid belt, and were forever tumbled around the sun among the millions of little worlds. They lost their bearings or ran out of fuel or a simple short in unfamiliar machinery stumped them, they starved or smothered or lost their minds in the bottomless starwell . . .

Oh, there were a thousand ways to die in space if you didn't know what you were doing. Engstrom thought it all very simple, but a fool can slash his wrists with a washcloth if he thinks it foolproof.

The Spaceways Act would stop all that. It would set up license examinations, and an Interplanetary Police Force, and rules about courses, rights of way, mining priorities; it would provide a listing of hazards to navigation which would really do what the swarm survey was supposed to do, and a hundred smaller provisions. It was a thorough job. Nikki, the first Martian Jarvis Crane had revived, had stooped over it with persistent canine curiosity.

“Let I'm see, Chris-fer; we had-



ded code of such sort. Included you lawings over arcs fweights may not follow? Such be needed — ”

Barclay sighed and turned on the radio. The whole Act was needed, before the slaughter became down-right dysgenic. Might as well forget it for a while. There was Mars to think about.

“BC77Y to 1,” he said, using the old code Crane preferred. The speaker squawked immediately and put out a powerful carrier-wave hum. At this distance? And what was Jarvis doing using AM —

A strained voice cut across his puzzlement. “Who’s that?”

“Barclay,” he said, faintly annoyed.

“Sir Christopher! Thank God! This is Henry Engstrom. I’m trapped in a whopper of a swarm. Been trying and trying to get out. Every time I put power into my damn engines, the whole boat acts like it was coming apart — ”

THE NAME clubbed Barclay, hard. The Coordinator’s son! Another of the 48%, caught in a meteor cloud. Engstrom had said the boy was heading for Phobos, but —

“Don’t you mount directionals?”

“No, this is only a moon-boat. For God’s sake, step on it! My hull’s beginning to heat up!”

“Turn off your power. You’re in the center of the swarm, obviously, and won’t be hit, and there must be a high percentage of iron in it.”

He cut his own power down to bottom stage, leaving only a primary field to keep him on course. “You must have been crazy to try this trip on Ehrenhafts. What happened?”

He laid a tracer on the answering voice, made a swift calculation on his slipstick, and fed the result into the little integrator.

“I was trying out my detector-field. I picked up a big blob coming my way and then the field burnt out. I started home right away, but the minute I reversed my drive this flock of rocks was all around me.”

“Natural y.”

“Eh? Well, after that the boat tagged right along with them no matter what I did.” His voice took on an hysterical petulance. “What’s the difference how it happened? Get me out of here — I’ll be cooked if it gets any hotter — ”

*Just like his father*, Barclay thought. *An arbitrary breed*. “It won’t get any hotter,” he told Henry with a tinge of irony. “Not for a while, anyhow; there’ll be no hysteresis as long as you keep your power off. Of course, you’re going toward the sun, but your food’ll run out long before you begin to warm up again.”

“How’d you know I didn’t have enough?”

“They never do,” Barclay returned enigmatically, and fell silent, regarding the integrator tape and shutting the rule courser back and

forth. Could be done. Anchor Henny magnetically, refocus the geotrons on Deimos, and let the fast-moving little Martian moon yank them both out; there was a choice between Mars and Jupiter as a relatively motionless base for the levering, since they were in conjunction from here. It should be interesting. Jupiter would probably be best — it wasn't as close but it had the mass. The metallic swarm would soak up quite a few Gauss but on a gravity base — of course it'll make him a little sick . . .

His fingers stopped on the way to the trips, and he sat violently motionless. The Act! If Henny were actually to wind up among the 48% —

He felt his heart lunge with a guilty sort of eagerness. Murder — but Barclay and the geotron had already murdered thousands. This might be the last. If the Coordinator's own son

"Sir Christopher? Are you still there? It's damn lonely out here."

Call Earth and threaten to leave him here unless Engstrom pushed the Act through? No better. Engstrom had power, and was ruthless by nature; he could send the whole swarm-survey out after Henny, and probably find him, too — after which Barclay would see Mars infrequently from the barred windows of Nationalist Haven.

Mars counted. He sighed again and drove his ship off the arc toward the meteor swarm.

THE MANUEVER turned out to be an easy one, and Barclay spent the next half hour holding young Engstrom's head over the waste trap. It was hard to resist kicking the sprat out after the contents of his stomach. Perhaps the Coordinator might realize what a narrow squeak it'd been — or put the Act through out of gratitude . . . Neither possibility was anything but fantastic.

"Gaaaah," said Henny weakly. "Oh — okay. I'm all right now." Released, he tottered to the empty navigator's chair and collapsed into it. Barclay wrinkled his nose and close the trap. "I'll rest a while 'n' shoot out of y'r way."

"You will like hell," Barclay snapped. His profanities were rather unimaginative, but they were rare enough to be forceful. "You'd never make it in that tomato-can now, and I haven't the time to shoe-horn you out of another swarm. You're coming with me."

Henny was strong enough to glare, but too weak to object. "All right," he said, "if you say so. Only, listen, don't tell dad about this, will you? He'd be wild. He wouldn't let me fly any more."

"You shouldn't," Barclay said grimly.

"I know, but I'll be careful. Honest. Please, Sir Christopher. I'll do you a favor sometime. No joke."

Barclay hated to be whined at. "All right." Disgustedly he swung his ship back toward Mars.

\* \* \*

Young Engstrom's extended stay on the red planet was hard to stomach. He was always in the way, sticking his nose into things, loudly refusing to be taken to Phobos, complaining of the sand, the thin air, the concentrated food, the high-pitched quality of every sound. He was particularly offensive about Nikki and the Martians in general; he developed a theory that they smelled like strong soap and shortly, began to appear afraid of them. A radio conversation with his wife on Phobos, of which Barclay overheard only the end, seemed to be the ninth or tenth installment of a bitter quarrel, and when Nikki volunteered to ferry Henny up to his dome, Henny consigned both Nikki and Phobos to at least that many different hells.

Still, the work went well. There were now two hundred and thirty-eight Martians in the city Gregory Marshall had thought dead millenia ago, and tomorrow there would be from one to four more, walking the ancient streets and pointing out almost disintegrated landmarks to each other. The building for Earth, and the rebuilding for Mars, was now only a few days behind schedule.

The principle project was the great Creche-city, where the newborn children would be segregated from their parents and from any possible contact with residual Dust. The Martians, Barclay hoped, would teach there. A generation ago there might have been widespread resent-

ment at the idea, but humanity under sentence of death had forgone much of its chauvinism. The debauchees had spent themselves, the suicides had disappeared down their one-way street, the patriots had long ago murdered each other; the few remaining Earthmen struggled for a reprieve.

And in that was the trap. There was a reprieve for the children — but none for their parents. One could not escape the Dust by careening off into space. The Dust was inside, and even the Martians had no cure for it. The Martians had not even had the Crane treatment — only suspended animation, where they had waited nearly eight thousand years for some event they could not have described. Crane, with his statistically impossible discovery, had turned out to be it.

Henny was unimpressed. "Eight thousand years, your grandmother's moustache," he snorted. "They were just hiding when we came, that's all. Damned if I'll stay on this rust-ball eight *months*. Even the sand's got spinach in it."

"You'll have to stay longer than that," Barclay said. "The sun's too close to the midline to get any messages through now. By the time we'll be able to raise Earth, we'll be able to take you home ourselves."

"By that time Jane'll be raising holy hell with my father because I'm not on Phobos, and he'll be at me to go there. I hate Phobos worse than I hate Mars. I was only going

there because Pa said I had to. I hate children."

"I'm sorry I can't cope with all your hates right now," Barclay said. "Maybe at the end of the year Nikki can take you; he's pretty skilful with the big ship already —"

"Me fly forty-five million miles with a talking dog nine feet high? Nothing doing. If you'd only towed my ship in with me maybe somebody could of fixed it and I'd be gone already. That boat cost me plenty, and I'll never get another one built with labor what it is now on Earth. If —"

Nikki sailed into view suddenly riding a geotronic crane, and raced toward them. Henny swore, covered his head with his hands, and fled. The crane glided gently to a stop beside Barclay, and the two looked after the stumbling figure.

"Fwetful?" the Martian asked.

"Fwactious," Barclay said grimly. "Ah, well. Nobody'll have a chance to get spoiled on *this* planet for a few centuries."

**HENNY STAYED.** Gradually he became more than a nuisance to Barclay; he became a symbol of defeat. That murder — if it had come off, there might have been a Spaceways Act by now, and lives saved to bear strong children. Instead, there was Henny, who swore at the very notion of children, and remained defiantly a few thousand miles away from a once-favorite mistress because his father made

him marry her.

In a queer way, Henny made Barclay feel guilty of that murder, because he was still alive. Very literally, his life was on Barclay's conscience. And at the end of the year, it turned out that Nikki would be unable to make the trip after all. Henny alternately raged and wept. In the end, Barclay, who above all hated to be whined at, took time out from his own work to haul the live corpse home.

It was just 400 days Earth time since Barclay had presented his plea to the Coordinator, and he wondered still once more how many new tragedies had bloodied the unpoliced spacelanes since that night. What was the death rate now? 55% — 60% — 70%? By the second day out Barclay could not get the question out of his mind; the enthusiasm of bringing a new planet back to life receded, struggled, drowned in it.

His radio buzzed sharply and he came to with a start. He must have been dreaming in his chair — he had the impression that the summons had already sounded several times. He flipped the tumbler.

"What ship is that?" the speaker demanded. "Ahoy, there, you in the big job. What's your name?"

"It hasn't got any name," Barclay said. "And if you're stuck in a meteor swarm, just go right along and don't bother me."

"Skip the backchat. Your number, please."

"Eh?" said Barclay.

"Your number. Haven't you got a number?"

"Why, privately," Barclay stammered. "BC77Y, if that tells you anything."

"No good," the radio returned instantly. "Stand by; we're coming aboard."

Barclay finally lost his temper, and lost it thoroughly. "What the hell!" he said. "Why can't you all go off and die quietly? Why add bad manners to your other stupidities? The old man's right — you're all a pack of damned fools, and not worth the saving." He stopped, choked, and drew another breath. "Boarding in space! So you're pirating each other now! Of all the —"

Something large and in a big hurry whanged off the BC77Y's hull.

"The next one," the radio said, "won't be slowed down by your web. The IPF isn't noted for good manners, mister. Valve down."

Barclay was too stunned to say another word; numbly he touched the board and dropped all but the primaries. In a moment a long, snub-nosed ship, evidently a converted Polish rocket, grew out of the starry blackness in the Y-Ray mirror and slid alongside. A sudden jolt announced that the stranger had reversed polarities and locked on; then there were tinkering noises outside the air-lock.

The business-like young man who came in wore a uniform, evidently

his own, though it had all the national insignia plucked off it. His two armed aides were in civvies, and had brassards with "IPF" neatly stencilled on them. The officer looked at Barclay, gaped, and snatched off his cap.

"Sir Christopher!" he said, swallowing. "Why didn't you say so?"

"I didn't realize you had a right to know," Barclay responded, recovering some of his composure. "Maybe you'd better draw me a diagram. I've been working on Mars for a year; the last I heard, the Spaceways Act was rotting in some pigeonhole."

"It was. But you remember the swarm survey?"

"Yes — the idea, as I recall, was to chart all the orbital swarms big enough to interfere with engine operation — or no, just all the ones that would be crossing the Exodus' line of flight during the whole six months."

"That's right," the officer said. "A big job. The survey had gotten up to K-G66 or some such classification when one of its ships found a derelict. It was pretty well melted by the sun circuit, but there were enough traces to check it, and by god it turned out to belong to old Engstrom's son. He was just a dark stain in the metal, I guess. The Coordinator raised hell and the Act was shot through on top priority."

"Somebody mention me?" The live corpse put his head around the door to Barclay's bunkroom. He could sleep through earthquakes, but the

sound of his own name alarmed him instantly. "Hey, look at the soldier. I told you you'd be in a jam if you didn't take me home —"

Barclay said, "Shut up."

The officer gaped for the second

time. "This is some catch," he said at last. "Looks like I'm not needed here."

Barclay grinned happily. "Yes, you are," he said. "Can you issue me a pilot's license?"

## THE END

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*Conducted by Mari Wolf*

ONE of these days I'm going to slip the car out when Rog isn't looking and go in search of the Atlantic Ocean. I know it must be around here somewhere—after all, according to the map New York City is right on the edge of it. But we've been here for months now and I haven't seen it yet.

Oh, well, probably it isn't very different from the Pacific, and I've certainly looked at *that* enough. For eighteen years, to be exact.

I guess fans just don't react like other people. Most newcomers to New York arrive with guide books on everything from *A Short History of Grant's Tomb* to *A Complete Time Table for Your Ten Days on the Eastern Seaboard*. Then they dash madly from one sightseeing bus to another, trying to keep up with their schedule. But Rog and I aren't like that. We've managed not to see any of the landmarks at all. Except for Rockefeller Center and the Empire State Building, and who could miss seeing them?

Yet we have visited various points of interest. Places that are interesting to science fiction fans, that is. We were over at a meeting of the ESFA — the Eastern Science Fiction Association—where the guest speaker that day was a certain Rog Phillips. And we've seen the science fiction and fantasy collections that Tom Gardner and James Taurasi have acquired and . . .

So you see, fans *are* different. Put them down in the middle of a Martian desert and they'd still manage to find some tentacled fellow fan's copy of *MAGINATION*. Except that in the Martian edition, of course, all the bug-eyed monsters would be people.

Now for an announcement:

SOMETIME in May, The Fantasy Veterans' Association will sponsor a "Convention-Auction" with the idea of using the profits from the auction to help supply sciencfiction fans in the Armed Forces with science, fantasy, or weird fiction mag-

azines.

The present plans, far from complete, call for the showing of one or two good stf movies and then to hold a giant auction. Material for the auction is asked of every fan, so look through your collection and send the Fan-Vets any mag duplicates for the auction.

The convention hall will be some easy-to-get-to place in New York City. A search for such a hall is now being made.

The Fan-Vets ask the readers of this column for the following:

1. Names and addresses of fans in the Armed Forces, so that he or she can be contacted and his or her wants placed on file and filled.
2. Any stf material for the above auction.

Any fan who has served in the Armed Forces or is now in the Armed Forces can become a member of the Fan-Vets. But remember you need not be a member to help or be helped by the Fan-Vets.

For full information write to Fan-Vets, Ray Van Houten, Secretary, 127 Spring Street, Patterson 3, New Jersey.

A 2c stamp sent to Mr. Van Houten will secure for you a copy of the latest issue of the organization's official Organ, "The Fan-Vets."

Now for the fanzines which have already come in to Fandora's Box for review. There are quite a few of them.

\* \* \*

**FANTASY-TIMES:** 10c; published twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing, N.Y. This is the leading newzine of the science fiction world, giving a complete coverage of all news of special interest to fantasy and science fiction fans. If you want to know what's going on in the field, this is the fanzine for you.

Here you'll find listings of all the new science fiction books just published, previews of the contents pages of the pro magazines, a coverage of movie, radio and television fantasy, and news of new magazines in the field and policy changes in current magazines. Also, news about personalities in the field that you wouldn't be likely to run across any other way.

Fantasy-Times isn't limited to American news either. It carries reports on science fiction activities and periodicals in England, Australia, and Latin America quite regularly. For example, the second December issue had a coverage of current Spanish magazines—two of them put out in Mexico, one in Argentina, and one in Spain. Even if you never see these magazines and never want to, it's interesting to know that your favorite authors and stories are being enjoyed by fans who can't read English. (It's fun, too, to read translations of your favorite stories and see how much of them you can understand.)

Anyway, it's always interesting to know what's going on behind the scenes. You get a picture of the writers and editors and artists as human beings, not just names on a title page. So if you want to find out what's going on in "The World of Tomorrow Today" — Fantasy-Time's subtitle—send your dime to James Taurasi and find out.

\* \* \*

**OUTLANDER:** 15c; published irregularly; Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana St., South Gate, California. This is the official organ of the Outlander Society, which is a small, informal group of fans living outside the city limits of Los Angeles.

The current issue is edited by John Van Couvering and covers the summer doings of the members and a re-



port on the Norwescon. It also contains its regular section, Filings From the Chain. These filings are excerpts from the long and unending chain letter that circulates among the membership of the Society and they're always interesting reading. It's like listening in on fragments of a dinner table conversation—somebody says something about the Westcon, somebody else comments about time travel, another person says something quite different, then there's an answer to the time travel theory. It's fun to listen in on, too.

This issue also contains Freddie Hershey's review of the Outlander meeting held at Rory Faulkner's, with Dr. Richardson of Mt. Wilson and his wife and child as guests. Dr. Richardson is also well known to fans as Philip Latham, whose stories you've probably enjoyed. The article really gives a good account of a typical Outlander meeting—if any such meeting could possibly be called typical.

Also in the issue is a story by Mari Wolf entitled "The Suppliant." Seems to me I ran across that one before . . .

SHANGRI-LA: 15c; Helene Mears, 1340 W. 4th. St., Los Angeles 17, California. "Shaggy," as it is affectionately called by the LASFS, is published by the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society, one of the largest and most active of the fan clubs. The current issue is No. 23, and is put out by the club's associate membership.

There's an article by Kris Neville entitled "Dianetics, an Appreciation," in which Kris states quite casually that he knows nothing about Dianetics himself, not having read the book, and can therefore be completely unbiased on the subject . . . Novel viewpoint, and a cleverly satiric

article.

There are three stories, my favorite being an untitled one by Sam Peebles. It has a good punch ending. And there's an article under the name Neslo Derfla called "Who Knocked the Science out of Science Fiction?" He compares modern science fiction to the early works of Verne and finds today's stories lacking. Says that they're neither inventive, plausible, scientific, nor prophetic. Now that's a rather sweeping condemnation . . . Derfla also says, "I sure would like to hear the argument for the other side—if there is one." Well, there's your chance for an argument. What about it? Only fight it out in Shaggy, please.

\* \* \*

FANSCIENT: 25c; quarterly; Donald Day, 3435 NE 38th. Ave., Portland 13, Oregon. With its Summer 1950 issue: Fanscient has completed three years as one of the top fanzines in the field. By the time you read this, the next issue should be out. It will have 64 pages, 16 of them in color, and is a little late because Don Day's work as chairman of the Norwescon committee didn't leave him much time to put a magazine together.

The summer issue has as its cover a photo from the movie *Destination Moon*, and there's an article about the making of this movie by Forrest J. Ackerman. Anthony Boucher tells a bit about himself and his work in "Author, Author." Then there's an off-trail story by Philip Barker called "—And the Strong Shall Inherit," that is really different.

Fanscient, digest sized, is one of the best looking and most carefully put together mags in the field. And the illustrations alone are worth a quarter. So what are you waiting for?

**SINISTERRA:** 25c; quarterly; G. M. Carr, 3200 Harvard N., Seattle 2, Washington. The Autumn 1950 issue of this publication of *The Nameless Ones* contains a large pictorial section covering the Norwescon. There are four pages of pictures of events and faces at the Eighth World Science Fiction Convention—pictures of celebrities and fans and convention highlights. Also there are articles about the Norwescon by Philip Barker, Wally Weber, G. M. Carr and Alderson Fry. If you were at the Convention, or if you're curious as to just what went on there, you couldn't do better than to send for the Autumn Sinisterra—Issue No. 3.

In fact, in addition to the regular fanzine *The Nameless Ones* have put out an excerpted edition containing just the Norwescon pictures and text. You can get it for 15c, and you may even get a nickel refund—the price isn't set definitely yet. It's well worth 15c, too.

Other features in the regular Sinisterra are stories by Clark Crouch, F. M. Busby, and Hatch & Bonnell, and some of the best fan poetry you'll find in any fanzine. It's really a well-planned and carefully put together fanzine too. Good mimeoing, good illustrations, excellent covers. Something you'll want to keep.

\* \* \*

**IMPOSSIBLE:** 10c; bimonthly; Burnett R. Toskey, 3933 15th. NE, Seattle 5, Washington. This is another production of *The Nameless Ones*, who are really putting out a lot of fanzines. The copy I have here is the second issue, December, 1950. The cover on it is really fascinating. I think it is supposed to be some sort of surrealist Christmas tree, but it may be something else altogether. Anyway, if it is a tree, it's an Impossible one.

The table of contents starts off with a department called "The Editor Croaks." Interesting editorial too. It seems that Impossible is a fanzine with a purpose — it's dedicated to driving all other magazines out of business and then dominating the field with nothing but Impossible stories . . . Hmmm. There are also in this issue stories by Kraus and Edison, a poem and illustration by G. M. Carr, and illos by Barker and Garcone, whose monsters are really quite appealing.

\* \* \*

**THE CRY OF THE NAMELESS:** G. M. Carr, 3200 Harvard N., Seattle 2, Washington. This is the newsletter put out by *The Nameless Ones* of Washington. I couldn't find its price listed anywhere, or how often it comes out, but my copy is dated December, 1950.

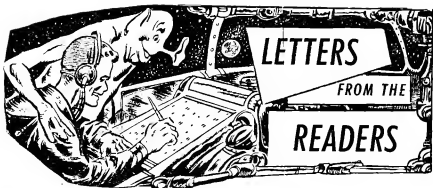
This newszine covers the activities of *The Nameless Ones* principally, and also gives general news of interest to all fans. The December issue also gives a complete list of the names of the Nameless—how that's possible if they are nameless it doesn't say—and the list is really impressive. Three full pages of members, most of them from Seattle and near-by Washington towns, but with some from out of state and as far away as Haiti. Northwest fandom seems to be getting more active all the time.

If you live in Washington and haven't heard of *The Nameless Ones*, get in touch with G. M. Carr. You'll be glad you did.

\* \* \*

Well, that's everything in Fandora's Box for now. Remember, if you have a fanzine and would like it reviewed here, send it to me at P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill.

—MARI WOLF



## A GREAT DISCOVERY

Dear Ed:

I, like a goodly percentage of others, do not write in letters to the editor of a magazine. However, when two Thorne Smiths are discovered in only half a century it is an occasion worthy of comment. I couldn't believe it—I still don't! Is it reincarnation, maybe?

Honestly, I haven't enjoyed or read anything of the type since reading the last book Thorne Smith wrote. I'm speaking, naturally, of Charles F. Myers and his *VENGEANCE OF TOFFEE* in the February issue of *IMAGINATION*. Maybe Myers doesn't belong in Madge, and I suppose you have received comments pro and con on the value of his story. But as far as this reader is concerned—publish him!

Whatever Thorne Smith had, Charles Myers has also, so please don't ever lose track of him!

Bryan G. Nicklin  
1309 Lincoln Ave.  
Lawton, Okla.

Receiving a "first" letter is always a thrill to an editor, Bryan. And we are especially glad that you got the urge to write yours because

of "Toffee". We take it that this is the first "Toffee" story you have ever read. For the record, in case you want to read other stories that have been published by Myers, look back in copies of *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES* during the past four years. We edited that magazine for five years, and Charles Myers was our own discovery. When we read his first story we said to everyone that here was the new Thorne Smith. And the readers of *FA* backed us up. And we don't mean an imitation—of which there are many. Myers is the only writer we have seen who can and has successfully made a niche for himself beside the great master. Naturally you'll be seeing all of Charlie's stories in *Madge*. We guarantee you a continued diet of "Toffee". And along those lines, we've got a new "Toffee" novel in the house right now! It's the most hilarious thing you've ever read—the best Myers has written to date. Watch for it coming up soon. . . Ed.

WONDERFUL, THAT'S US!

Dear Bill:

The February issue of *Madge* was wonderful!

Glad to see Rocklynne back. Sturgeon was at his best—which is tops. Hooray for TOFFEE! What more can I say about Myers? And this new writer, Hal Annas with his "MAID-TO-ORDER!"—yummy!

THE BARRIER, THE BUILDERS, and WORLD OF THE MAD were routine. But as a whole—what an issue!

Eldon K. Everett  
P. O. Box 513  
Tacoma, Wash.

*Aw, shucks, Eldon—you think that issue was good? Just wait until you see what's coming up! . . . But seriously, thanks for the kind words, and we're especially glad you liked Hal Annas. He's Imagination's discovery, you know. We think Hal has a great deal of talent, and are glad you and the rest of our readers think so too.*

*Ed.*

## THE TOP MAGAZINE, HE SAYS!

Dear Ed:

Congratulations and a bucket of roses to you. It was impossible but you've done it. You've made me like your magazine better than the others I've been reading for years.

The main reason for my big switch to Madge was the remarkable job done by Charles F. Myers in his VENGEANCE OF TOFFEE. Myers' story and others of its type are just what we need. As far as I'm concerned there are too many serious, world-shaking stories and not enough humorous ones. Myers is the only writer I've seen yet who can write a good humorous story in fantasy without making it seem facetious. I say let's have more Myers!

As for the other stories, THE BUILDERS had a good twist at the end making it stand out. THE

WORLD OF THE MAD had a thin plot but some very good description and writing. MAID—TO ORDER! was facetious (the trouble I mentioned before) but otherwise was good. The rest were ok but not of rave notice.

Don't get the idea I'm tearing your stories to pieces. I really enjoyed them all, especially the Myers novelette. I know you'll keep subsequent issues of Madge up to par with this wonderful February issue.

Loyal L. Strom  
1325 Fresno Ave.  
Bend, Oregon

*Naturally it makes us feel good to hear you say our magazine is at the top of the field. All we'd like to say is thanks a lot, and we'll do our best to keep every issue at the high level of entertainment you expect. . . . Ed.*

## KEEP REIGNING!

Dear Ed:

May I add my hearty welcome to you, Bill Hamling, on taking over IMAGINATION. With such a Captain at the helm Madge will reign as King of them ALL!

I've just finished reading the February issue. Congratulations to Malcolm Smith for a fine cover. I do prefer seeing the fair sex depicted in more artistic surroundings, however!

The stories were quite good, and I especially liked WORLD OF THE MAD, an original approach. Also REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR was very entertaining on a quiet evening.

Praise be that Madge is pocket size. I hate to fold mags to fit in my pocket!

One other thing. There are many people who would enjoy reading fantasy if it wasn't dressed up with

pseudo-science explanations. I hope you won't ruin a good fantasy story by trying to "explain" it with complicated formulae, etc.

Don't relax your efforts. Keep every issue right on top!

Reginald S. V. Wood  
2109 E. Virginia Ave.  
Denver, Colo.

*Thanks for the kind welcome. And along those lines we'd like to take this opportunity to extend personal and sincere thanks to all of our many friends and readers who have written in congratulating us on taking over IMAGINATION. We only wish we had the time to answer every letter. But that's out of the question—we've got to keep getting the magazine out too!—so thanks to all of you. We're very happy to be at the helm of Madge, and we intend to make it the top magazine you expect us to.*

*As far as fantasy stories go, you'll get the best, and don't worry about scientific explanations cluttering up the fantasy. There won't be any. After all, a good fantasy story doesn't need explanations—as long as it's enjoyed! We'll leave the science to our science-fiction yarns. . . . . Ed.*

## SCIENCE-FICTION IN FACT!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I've been reading science-fiction for a year now since I rediscovered it after an absence of almost twenty years. A peculiar circumstance prompted my return to active reading.

Nearly twenty years ago I read a story in AMAZING STORIES concerning a "color organ". The hero had created an organ that "played" colors on a screen—like a movie screen. Recently I happened to see a demonstration of a new

device similar to that described in that early story. There was no "organ", but there was a screen upon which colors swirled and played amazingly. A phonograph was integral in this demonstration since in the process, music, acting upon certain chemicals, etc., produced the swirling color patterns on the screen. For the record, I witnessed this at Loeser's Department Store in Brooklyn.

Incidentally, congratulations to you in your new position as editor of IMAGINATION. I know it will be a challenge to you—one that you won't fall down on.

About "Toffee". It was hilarious! The author did an excellent job in the Thorne Smith tradition. It looks as if Charles Myers will eventually inherit the master's mantle.

I'd also like to say that your magazine is one of the few I read consistently. I've found that you publish the type of story that fits my idea of good reading entertainment. So keep up the fine performance in the future.

Esther Stanton Davis  
214 W. 92nd St.  
New York 25, N. Y.

*Your experience is quite interesting. It only goes to show that what we expound as a "new idea" in science-fiction today is really the "fact" of tomorrow. Look at radar, the V-2 rockets, jets, the atom bomb—but need we go on? . . . . . Ed.*

## OUCH, HE HIT ME, MAW!

Dear Ed:

To come to the point quickly, this is going to be criticism, constructive, I hope. And I'll lead it off with the old song-and-dance about "just one man's opinion".

February issue:

Quote: "Front cover . . . illustra-

ting **REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR.**

Maybe I should read the story again. I don't remember any space ships in it. Although I should kick. At least Bergey didn't paint it!

Stories:

**REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR**—at least it was different. I've never read anything like it before. But what happened?

**SHADOW, SHADOW ON THE WALL**—this one I would have expected to find in **WEIRD TALES**. Which is one reason I stopped reading it.

**MAID—TO ORDER!**—words fail me. I'll just say: "Aaaak!"

**THE BARRIER**—why didn't you leave those pages blank?

**VENGEANCE OF TOFFEE**—Thorne Smith has so many imitators you would think at least one of them would be good. This Myers isn't. But you seem so attached to him I guess I'll just have to leave issues containing stories of his on the newsstands.

**THE BUILDERS**—if you must print robot stories, please get a new plot!

**WORLD OF THE MAD**—same comment as on first story.

Final conclusion: Another 35c gone down the drain.

Friendly advice: Take a good look at **GALAXY**.

J. F. Streinz  
2604 Forest Way, NE  
Atlanta, Ga.

*First of all, of course you're entitled to your opinions—and as you can see, you get the right to put them in print. Which is a fact we want to stress. Sure we like to hear nice things said about the magazine—but we also want to know sincere objections too. And this department belongs to the readers, so don't think a letter is thrown away*

*if it contains criticism.*

*We don't intend to argue the value of the stories you mentioned. All we can say is we're sorry we failed to please you with that issue, and hope future issues will be more to your liking. But we will argue with you on Myers being an imitation of Thorne Smith. All we can say is perhaps you can't see the forest because of the trees . . . And there will be "Toffee" stories in Madge—as you can see from other letters in this issue the little lady is quite popular.*

*As far as the cover was concerned, it was a symbolic painting, not intended to portray an actual scene, but one implied by the story. You'll find both symbolic and illustrative covers on Madge. We'll try and give as much variety as possible.*

*So what's the matter with WEIRD TALES? Sure they are a competitor of ours—in a sense. But that magazine has been in the field a long time, and many fine stories of science and fantasy were printed in it in years past. Perhaps not so much today, but there was a time . .*

*As to GALAXY, Horace Gold has been doing as good a job as he can. We hope he'll be able to do even better. We note he's been forced to raise the price of his magazine. We hope everything works out for him. In the meantime, keep your eye on IMAGINATION. You wouldn't want to miss anything! . . . Ed.*

**LATE ISSUES:**

Dear Bill:

The 1st issue of Madge under your guidance (February) was **REAL** good! Only one gripe though. Madge comes out more than a little late it seems. How about correcting that? . . . But it's worth waiting for. They always say, "It

takes time to make good wine." That probably goes for science-fiction magazines too, of which IMAGINATION is No. 1.

The stories in the February issue were all excellent —so I won't waste time mentioning them individually.

David Pike  
Box 203  
Rodeo, Cal.

*We're glad you mentioned the lateness of Madge. That's been due to circumstances beyond our control. As we stated in the April editorial, we suffered a severe fire at the printing plant which threw our schedules haywire. We've been gradually bringing them back to normal, and you can expect future issues on sale on the date we announce. But you're right, Madge is worth waiting for—but you won't have to wait from now on, we promise you .. Ed.*

## A PLEASANT SURPRISE

Dear Bill:

Needless to say, I was very sorry to see you leave FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. But when I picked up the February issue of Madge and discovered you had taken over, well I just had to write an overdue letter and tell you what a pleasant surprise it was.

IMAGINATION is just what its name implies: the finest in imaginative fiction. I hope—and know—it will stay that way.

The February issue was well worth reading. A new writer in your pages whom I would like to see more of is Hal Annas. I think you've got a "find" in him.

REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR was by far the finest story in the issue, with VENGEANCE OF TOFFEE running a close second. Funny though, this Toffee yarn was not quite as good as some of the prev-

ious ones, that is, the hilarity standard wasn't as high.— But high enough!

Suggestion: Get more space into the Reader section. And cut down on the fact articles. I think they are "silly" features.

Oh yes, anyone who has back copies of sci mags to sell etc., contact me.

Jan Romanoff  
26601 S. Western  
Lomita, Cal.

*Thanks for the nice letter, Jan. And you'll notice that the Reader's Pages are materially increased. We intend to keep it that way too. And write again. . . . .Ed.*

## THE BEST IN TEN YEARS

Dear wh:

I only have this to say about Madge: I have been reading science and fantasy fiction for quite a number of years—about 20—and as far as I am concerned IMAGINATION is the finest magazine to come out in the last ten of those years. AMAZING STORIES & FANTASTIC ADVENTURES have always been the best, (but you were Managing Editor of both of those mags—so enough said!) and you may have to go some to beat them—but if you can't, who can? I'd say that if these first issues of Madge are any indication, then you'll certainly do it.

The stories in the February issue were really fine. I can't praise them enough. Just keep up the good work. You've got a steady fan for the years to come!

Sgt M. E. Von Voltenburg  
A. F. 17028772  
3765th Stu. Sqdrn.  
Sheppard Air Force Base,  
Texas

*Some might, nice words there, Sergeant, and we'll do our best to live*

up to every one of them. . . . Ed.

## A ZIFF-DAVIS GHOST!

Dear Ed:

I have just finished reading what you so fondly have come to refer to as "Madge". That is, the February issue. From reading your editorial I immediately felt at home, which of course you will understand when I tell you that I am a long time member of the Ziff-Davis, AS & FA Fan Club and recognized immediately those wonderful and magnetic names, Bill Hamling and Ray Palmer.

Here is my review of the stories. (Now don't get panicky!) After practically losing all faith in stf with your first yarn—To Be Or Not To Be, indeed! What a ridiculous phrase to end a yarn of such magnitude with! A phrase that in such a story would be as a microsecond to a millenium! . . . . I then proceeded to wade rather stodgily through the next, SHADOW, SHADOW, ON THE WALL, which helped considerably to boost my morale. The next MAID—TO ORDER! was mediocre, and the next, THE BARRIER, was just what the name implied.

But then—oh then! Comes the Rolling of Drums and Blaring Trumpets for my love of loves—TOFFEE! Having been her avid fan these many years in FA (where you started her — thank you) is what actually brought me to break my rule of not buying new stf mags. Words cannot describe the happy moments this story gave me. It seems that Charlie Myers has Humanity tied up in a nutshell. Too bad that someone doesn't give old Terra a kick in the Torrid Zone!

THE BUILDERS was nice. The ending just up and smacked me for a row of ashcans. Very neat. WORLD OF THE MAD was fair to

middlin'. I don't think I'd give up my chance at immortality for a neurotic wife!

All in all your magazine is delightful and enclosed you will find my subscription—and before the attendants in white come to drag me back to my cell, I would like to ask if Madge isn't what you might call a Ziff-Davis ghost in miniature? And if it is—don't change it!

George L. Burke  
379 New Castle Ave.  
Portsmouth, N.H.

*Needless to say, we're glad you broke that rule and bought a new mag. That was a wise decision, George. And we feel confident, it will prove to be a happy one. We're very glad you felt right at home when you read the magazine. As you know, we always prided ourselves in maintaining and encouraging a friendly atmosphere in all the magazines we used to edit. We intend that Madge shall have that same feeling of friendliness from reader to editor. We feel that readers not only like to read the stories in a magazine, but they like to get to know the editor as well, and feel free to talk things over at all times. Certainly we, as editors, have always wanted to get to know our readers as much as possible within the limitations of the printed page. We think we've made many thousands of friends in the past number of years, and we want to increase that number as time goes on.*

*Which reminds us, when we left FA & AS we weren't able to say in our closing editorial just what we planned on doing. Many of our friends aren't aware yet that we've taken over the destiny of Madge. So spread the news to your science-fiction friends who may not have heard. We'd like to welcome them into the inner circle of Madge, as well as the*



thousands of new readers we're already getting acquainted with.

Ghost, you say? Well now, maybe the past is hard to break away from. But then, who's breaking away? We were very proud of FA—and always will be. It's a fine magazine and a fine family of people who put it out. We may have left the family, but Z-D and its top sf books will always occupy a fond spot in our memories. We'll make Madge live up to the standard we set there—and we'll even go one better. Wait and see!

As to your love of loves watch for the new "Toffee" novel coming up soon! . . . . . Ed.

RE: DEVIL STAR

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Could you comment editorially (or perhaps in the Reader section) on the story, REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR. . . ? Either I am exceedingly dull or the story is far too esoteric for me. Whichever the case may be, please give me some inkling of what meaning, if any, was behind the story.

I'm not particularly fond of that type of fantasy—I never even cared for the so-called master, A. Merritt. At any rate, I am simple enough to want to understand at least the basic premise of the story.

I know I've already written one letter to you on that issue, but I'm making this a separate letter to emphasize my confusion.

Esther Stanton Davis  
214 W. 92nd. St.  
New York 25, N.Y.

*The basic plot idea as we saw it was that Devil Star sought to evade the law of nature which said he must mate and die. He thought he had succeeded, but in the far eons he suddenly discovered that he had sired—that he had not been able to*

*circumvent the law after all. When he became aware of this he finally gave in to the demand of nature and died—happy.*

Now that we look back at the story we see that perhaps it was a bit too much on the thought-provoking side. Certainly you would have to probe pretty deep—because the scope of the story was somewhat tremendous. We were fascinated by the utter "alienness" of it, the picture of vastness it created. But on second thought, we agree with you. We like a story where the premise is right in front of you. After all, we're not trying to be educated with science-fiction, we want to be entertained! So we'll watch that sort of thing in the future. . . . . Ed.

. . . . AND THEY LAUGHED

Dear Ed:

This is my first fan letter to any publication, and I'm afraid it will develop into something more than just that.

First off, let me say that I enjoy IMAGINATION very much. I am an avid reader of both science-fiction and fantasy and your magazine is one of the best—I enjoy it from cover to cover.

Now for the something more. It is, obviously, a subject that has been talked about by many of your readers before. I'm referring to the movie, DESTINATION MOON. As far as I was concerned, it was excellent. What I wanted to speak of though was not the picture itself, but the audience. There was a general tendency to laugh at the film, and to ridicule it. You would think it would have made people think, and not laugh.

Another thing I am curious about, has anybody ever put out a dictionary of science-fiction terms? If not,

why not? It would be a great help, and certainly interesting.

In closing let me say again how much I enjoyed the February issue of Madge. And more "Toffee" please!

Mrs. Dorothy R. Hansen  
1802 Symons St.  
Richland, Wash.

*Unfortunately, Dorothy, you have to talk about 'he film when you ask why did the audience laugh? We experienced the same thing when we saw the film. There was general tittering when a dramatic incident took place. Why? It's very simple—we think. People go to a theater to be entertained. In order to achieve the entertainment they want a good story to become interested in. If the story is good, the dramatic incidents will impress them. In DESTINATION MOON the story was so incidental as to be non-existent. The film actually was a scientific study of coming space flight. You couldn't really get interested in the characters because they weren't people with problems you could sympathize with. They were scientists with one mission—to conquer space. So with a lack of story to hold the audience, when a dramatic incident occurred it looked ludicrous. Tragedy can very often appear humorous if you're not connected with it—it's a matter of viewpoint. If the audience had felt it was part of the expedition—part of the story (of which there was none) then there would probably not have been the tittering you refer to.*

*It's a sad but we think true, fact. Sure we want Hollywood to produce a lot of sf films. But let them take warning—provide a good dramatic story with believable characters. Then the popularity and credibility will be something to see.*

*As to the dictionary, no we don't know of any such project. How about*

*the rest of you readers? . . . . Ed.*

FROM TAGEU, KOREA

Dear Ed.

I received a copy of the February issue of IMAGINATION on March 5th, and I really enjoyed it. At that time I was Corporal of the Guard and had to be awake from 11:30 to 4:30 the following morning. During that time I read all the stories in the magazine except REVOLT OF THE DEVIL STAR.

Aside from the pleasant company of Madge it was a cruel night. It was snowing rather heavily and was very damp. I had to check the guard many times to be sure that everything was all right. We have five guard posts and had ROK (Korean soldiers) in four of them. In between my duties I enjoyed the magazine. But then the enclosed subscription speaks for that!

I'd like to give you my order of preference for the stories I read:

1. MAID—TO ORDER!
2. THE VENGEANCE OF TOFFEE
3. THE BUILDERS
4. SHADOW, SHADOW, ON THE WALL . . .
5. THE BARRIER
6. WORLD OF THE MAD

Keep IMAGINATION coming!

Cpl. Donald S. Lambert  
RA 37 642 865  
Ordnance Field Group  
8046th Army Unit  
APO 301 % PM  
San Francisco, Calif.

*We are very proud to get a letter like this, Don. If Madge has helped you, one of our grand fighting men, get a little pleasant relaxation, then it has served more than its purpose. And you can bet we'll keep them coming. And with stories by your favorites too. Watch for them. . Ed.*

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